

# **HUNGARIAN SHORT STORIES**

## **(19th and 20th Centuries)**

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## INTRODUCTION

Hungarian literature, one of the least known literatures in Europe, has produced works of international literary rank mainly in the realm of poetry. The traditions of Hungarian verse date back to the sixteenth century, to the first great Hungarian lyricist, Bálint Balassi. He voiced not only the exuberance of the Hungarian Renaissance, but his boisterousness and sentimentality, his choice of themes dealing with the warrior's life, with love and religious fervour, made him a model for subsequent generations of Hungarian poets. From the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present day, Hungarian literature has been a triumphal march of lyric poetry - each generation saw the emergence of great lyricists, who have, however, remained almost completely unknown to people abroad and to international literary opinion. The reason? Perhaps that the language of Hungarian poetry has always been refreshed from folklore and the archaic sources of Hungarian literature, so that the faithful reproduction of the hues of its idiom would have required extraordinary gifts and poetic power on the part of the translators. But the isolation, the unfamiliarity of Hungarian poetry and of Hungarian literature generally, may also be explained by the fact that in the last century, the chief concern of our authors was with the establishment of a national character. This concern overruled another - that of speaking to Europe, to mankind at large, and with it the requirement of contents that would transcend national limitations.

While Hungarian poetry was able, by the end of the eighteenth century, to boast of several great poets, narrative prose remained in its naive, archaic state. The novel, this most bourgeois product of European bourgeois development, was even as late as the first half of the nineteenth century only in an incipient stage in this country. Yet there had been quite a few spontaneous and characteristic manifestations of narrative art in earlier Hungarian prose. The parables of mediaeval codices, some of the dramatic passages in seventeenth-century memoirs, portions of the correspondence of Transylvanian princes and aristocrats, and, of course, the treasure trove of Hungarian folk tales - all these were important precursors of later Hungarian narrative writing.

In the first half of the nineteenth century it was the imitation of Eugène Sue and Walter Scott that set off the development of the Hungarian novel. The "mysteries" of the former were somewhat alien to the environment of the provincial Hungarian towns into which they were transplanted - the historical atmosphere of the latter was far better suited to the subjects and characters of Hungarian history. It was after such preliminaries that the Hungarian novel was born in the works of Mór (Maurus) Jókai, at the middle of the last century. Jókai established the national form of the Hungarian novel - in his picturesque and romantic manner he portrayed the personalities of the period preceding the revolution of 1848 - of the then recent past - the heroes of the Hungarian independence movements, the morals, customs and scenes of the vanishing feudal-patriarchal Hungary. The charm of Jókai's works is due to the nostalgic colouring of the recent past and his emotional, melancholic farewell to an old and familiar world. This nostalgia and emotion may also be felt in his short stories. The writers of the second half of the century - particularly Mikszáth, who in many respects followed Jókai and may, next to him, be regarded as the most significant author of the period - sang the swan song of the developing bourgeois Hungary to the old, intimate, patriarchal Hungary. In the short stories and novels of Jókai and Mikszáth the old world is clad in fairy hues; amid the conditions of capitalist Hungary, the epoch whose termination was marked, by 1848 suddenly came to seem humane and pleasant, heroic and interesting, though it had in fact been tainted

by Hapsburg tyranny, feudal conditions and semi-colonial subservience to the Austrian empire. In this manner, Jókai and Mikszáth established a lyrical approach to the recent past. They saw heroes and eccentrics in the Hungary of yore, and both types equally require the descriptive art of romanticism and of realism to portray them. With Jókai and Mikszáth the Hungarian towns and country manors became populated with strange and unique characters and personalities. The art of these writers harbours a peculiar confession - that the second half of the century looked with emotion and pain upon the hopes and aims that had preceded 1848. The defeat of the revolution and of the struggle for freedom had thwarted the fulfilment of these aims and the hopes remained unrequited. Jókai and Mikszáth voiced the feelings of the “better half” of the nation - capitalist Hungary looked back on the Hungary of the pre-1848 period, as upon its own better part. Or, as a mature and disillusioned man, upon the happy, magnanimous, youthful period of great expectations, bold ventures and selfless heroism.

It was Jókai and Mikszáth who gave birth to modern Hungarian short-story writing. These short stories were a development of the anecdote, itself the favoured literary form of the old, patriarchal Hungary. These full-flavoured anecdotal short stories, built up round a point, are in many ways different from Maupassant’s type of short story. The characters of these short stories are heroes or eccentrics. The anecdote is suitable for the portrayal of both types. Its kindly, humorous savour deprives heroism of its poignancy, and eccentricity of the painful feeling of backwardness. The faithful heir, tender and cultivator of the anecdotal art of Jókai and Mikszáth was Károly Eötvös.

End-of-the-century Hungary awoke from its romanticism. In our country this romanticism had a longer after-life than anywhere else in the world. The cult of the recent past entertained by the period of capitalism, could only be maintained amid the forms of romanticism. But the young generation of writers at the end of the century had no reminiscences of this pre-1848 fairyland. Their experiences were simpler and more bitter. A truly urban Hungary had come into being, which saw even the village differently than the patriarchal mid-century generation. This period turned its attention to the unsolved, unsettled social problems of its day - and the breath of a new revolution may be felt in the passion with which the young generation drew attention to the destitution of the peasantry, the defencelessness of simple people and the depravity of the gentry. One of the leading figures of this new literature - a special kind of *littérature engagée* that was permeated with a sense of responsibility - was Sándor Bródy. And in his immediate vicinity, István Tömörkény provides an example of the philanthropic, sympathetic view of the people entertained by the urban intelligentsia. Tömörkény made a veritable *discovery* of the peasant world which the heirs of romanticism had so far only presented on the scenes of bucolic plays and sentimental short stories, in an idealized, syrupy setting. His short stories are sometimes rendered cumbersome by their ethnographic descriptions - inventories of customs, implements and the peculiarities of various trades. Zsigmond Móricz, with his rich knowledge of the peasantry, thought Tömörkény’s short stories were “ethnographic museums.” Yet there was need for this “inventory” to be made, because the world which Tömörkény described was as unknown to the educated classes as the life of an African tribe. More or less contemporaneously with the poor of the farmsteads on the *pusztas*, this period also discovered the urban poor, the proletarians. Ferenc Molnár was the first, before he undertook his more celebrated but also more superficial ventures in stagecraft, to take note of the urban poor and to discover the bitter-sweet poetry of their life.

The generation of short-story writers who emerged at the turn of the century, played only the overture to the great poetic revolution that developed in this country between 1905 and 1919. This was intrinsically a revolutionary period, throughout Europe. The unallayed, defeated Hungarian revolution of 1848-1849 came to life again in the bourgeois revolution of 1918 and

the proletarian revolution of 1919, undertaking to complete the work that had been left unfinished in 1849. As in Petőfi's age, literature at the beginning of the century again became one of the sources of inspiration for this revolutionary fervour. In the lyrical field, the soaring poetry of Endre Ady was a portent of the great storm to come. Ady's companion in prose was Zsigmond Móricz. The revolutionary forces maturing in the peasantry were so strikingly voiced in the work of Móricz as though his were the words of a belated participant in the Hungarian peasant revolution of the sixteenth century. But Móricz was a belated author in other respects too. It was through his artistic portrayal of reality that Hungarian prose made up for the omissions of the long-lived post-romanticism of the nineteenth century. This post-romanticism had prevented Hungarian novels from presenting a picture of society that was of similar value, or a portrayal of the characteristic types of the period that was of similar richness to that achieved by European novels from Balzac to Tolstoy. Perhaps it was this belatedness that made the medium of Móricz' work so crowded and dense - perhaps it was this that lent his art so synthetic a character. For the synthesis of Móricz includes the concise and sombre tradition of the Hungarian folk ballads - the "Barbárok" (Barbarians) and "Hét krajcár" (Seven Pennies) themselves preserve something of this tradition - the linguistic splendour of the seventeenth-century memorials, and also the procedures of the modern, analytical character-study novel. Móricz's life work reflected the profound crisis of Hungarian society after the defeat of the 1919 revolution, as it did the ruin of the peasantry, the decay of country squiredom and the slow, threatening disintegration of the Hungarian bourgeoisie. For this very reason, Móricz established a grandiose, pan-national art of novel writing, and with him the Hungarian novel attained the heights which in poetry had already been achieved in the previous century.

The short stories of Móricz are alternately concerned with idyllic and tragic events. The idyll and tragedy are, of course, the two extreme characteristic forms of the feelings entertained in the period about 1919. By the time of the First World War, Hungarian literature - and naturally the short story too - were in a highly differentiated condition. The requirement for romanticism, for poesy, again surged to the fore and after the naturalism of the *fin de siècle* generation, by way of a reaction, the new art that used the tools of impressionism also appeared in Hungarian short-story writing. The requirement for idyllic writing became but deeper, under a firmament of social tragedies. The humour and charm of Jenő Heltai is as much a satisfaction of the requirement for the idyllic, as is the fairy world of Gyula Krúdy. The nostalgic feelings of Jókai and Mikszáth appear with renewed intensity, in highly decorative and stylized forms with Krúdy. It is with him that the poetry of the "recent past" gained complete fulfilment - the *old Hungary* whose figures he presents, is transformed into a fairyland of imagination and romanticism. It is obvious that Krúdy is *a fugitive* from his own period, and this escape into the land of dreams parallels to some extent all that world literature also attempted to do in the 1920's.

The national form of the Hungarian novel may be regarded as having been evolved by the first decades of the twentieth century. The novels of Móricz, Margit Kaffka and Mihály Babits mark the conclusion of this process. And nevertheless it seems as though the lyrical inclinations of Hungarian literature were manifested in the fact that the ideal of the perfect form was found in the *genre* of the short story, instead of large-scale compositions. The treasury of Hungarian short stories contains more masterpieces than that of the Hungarian novel. Margit Kaffka, who in her novel "Színek és évek" (Sights and Seasons) sang the swan song of the Hungarian country squires, in her short stories also depicts the crisis of the former leading class in Hungary. In the 1920's Hungarian literature became increasingly gloomy. The first signs of this gloom are apparent in the short stories of Andor Gábor. Under the firmament

of the counter-revolutionary period, escape was offered either by dreams such as Krúdy's, or by a yearning for the purity and humaneness of the peasants' world, like that expressed by Ferenc Móra. Several of the latter's contemporaries, in fact, exaggerated the idealization of the archaic peasant life and created a peasant myth. Móra, however, remained immune to this kind of peasant romanticism and contrasted his own age, that of the inter-war years, the age of the new barbarism, with the pure humanism of the poor people's world, the memories of his own childhood.

The period around the First World War may also be regarded as a golden age of Hungarian short-story writing. Heltai, Krúdy, Kaffka and Móra were not alone in representing the generation of authors who replaced the anecdotal style of the previous century with a new art of short-story writing, one that seems both lyrical and philosophical. Short stories played a more important part in the lifework of Dezső Kosztolányi, Géza Csáth and Frigyes Karinthy than in that of any of their contemporaries. Among the writings of Karinthy, permeated with humour and wisdom, his short stories occupy a singular position - they are his means for expounding and illustrating one or other of his paradoxes. Karinthy's embittered playfulness conceals the moralist's lack of illusions - for the post-war generation, morals signified what illusion used to mean for their predecessors. In the first period of Kosztolányi, Csáth and Karinthy the paradox, improvisation and playfulness were dominant. Their strange stories are too speculative in character, the idea is too obvious in them. Kosztolányi was led to a recognition of the startling dramas of the human soul by Freudism, thus to achieve the newly defined morality which was manifested in an emotive, sympathetic love and compassion for erring man. Kosztolányi and his companions - including Géza Csáth - undertook to portray the tragedies of everyday life. The excentrics and heroes of the short stories of the last century, the barbaric peasants of Móricz' stories, were in the inter-war period replaced by nameless ordinary folk, the humble victims of modern civilization, the undistinguished pariahs of the cities. The majority of Kosztolányi's stories are about these moving and senseless lives.

Bewilderment at the tragedy and senselessness of life was an attitude characteristic of most short-story writers between the two wars. The most prominent representative of these wise and disillusioned authors was Sándor Hunyady. In an age that brought the disruption of forms into fashion he adhered to strict, classically simple form. Hunyady did not believe in ideals or devote himself to any particular faith. The way he stands outside, his impersonal observer's vigilance nevertheless express the same moral attitude as that of Kosztolányi or Karinthy. The Hungarian literature of the inter-war years may well be called a literature of diseased times. The moral approach of the period could be most faithfully expressed by the view that the writer's main task is to report to his fellow-men on his own forebodings of danger.

The works of the two most significant short-story writers of the period, Andor Endre Gelléri and Lajos Nagy, are in fact suffused with reports of similar purport. Both expressed the same disquiet, the same feeling of danger - yet how different their methods were. Gelléri recorded the realities of the first part of the thirties - the years of the great economic slump. In his short stories we may discover the specific conception of life entertained at the time - the bitter mixture of hopelessness and the urge to live, of pain and joy that then filled the hearts of decent men. Gelléri's short stories are poetic confessions about a remote age, and beyond the apparent playfulness of these confessions, lies the latent threat of tragedy.

The unrequited demands of Hungarian history emerged with renewed urgency. These unsolved problems had been left as a heritage to the 1930's by the defeated revolutions of 1848 and 1919. In the period preceding the Second World War, Hungarian short stories heralded the need for change through their terse and precise statement of the gravity of the

existing situation, the diagnosis and declaration of the phenomena of disintegration and crisis. The great master of this diagnostic, terse and objective art was Lajos Nagy. His writings are very often gloomy and tenebrous, their satire is embittered and ruthless, their tone acrid and severe. His lifework showed almost the whole world as hopeless and devoid of prospects. Yet it is actually not misanthropy, but a heightened, humanistic sense of love that is expressed in his short stories, which by showing the untenable conditions are themselves an argument for something better and more humane.

The development and fruition of the Hungarian short story has been the work of about a century and a half. This literary form has acquired an importance similar to that of lyric poetry in Hungarian literature, because it has achieved a fortunate harmony of the inspirations derived from national and international sources. The anecdotal short stories of post-romanticism were superseded at the end of the century, under the influence of the short stories of Maupassant and Chekhov, by the modern type of short story, which had attained to a position of hegemony in world literature. Through Móricz the Hungarian short stories that had developed according to the Western form were enlivened by the influence of Hungarian folklore, and in the 1920's and 1930's a path similar to that of Western surrealism was adopted by Krúdy, while surrealism also exerted a direct influence on Gelléri.

The Hungarian short story thus itself underwent the process which was also the most important process of the whole of Hungarian literature - it succeeded in expressing its specifically Hungarian message in such forms and by such techniques that have rendered the unique, the national, the particularly Hungarian features comprehensible to a wider international reading public.

*István Sőtér*

## MÓR JÓKAI

(1825-1904)

At one time called “Hungary’s greatest story-teller,” Jókai is still undoubtedly one of her most popular writers of fiction. Several of his novels were in his lifetime translated into German, French, English, Russian, Polish and Czech. His patriotic or adventure stories and novels or romances, whether excursions into Hungary’s past history or laid in a contemporary setting, have been favourite reading among several generations.

The son of a lawyer, he was intended to join the profession. For some time before the 1848 War of Independence he had been one of the coterie which gathered around the poet Sándor (Alexander) Petőfi as its principal moving spirit, and, like his great friend, he too played a part - if a more cautious one - in those momentous events. Following the débacle, he was compelled to go into hiding, for a régime of ruthless oppression held the country in its sway. As soon as an easing of absolutist terror made this possible, he came out of hiding and returned to Pest. More historical novels followed. Jókai tried to keep alive his countrymen’s spirit of defiance in the face of their present humiliation by reminding them of the grandeur of their national past. Before long, he became tremendously popular. An extremely prolific writer, Jókai published one novel (sometimes two novels) each year. His historical novels - *Egy magyar nábob* (*A Hungarian Nabob*), *Kárpáthy Zoltán, Erdély aranykora* (*Midst the Wild Carpathians*), *Törökvilág Magyarországon* (*The Slaves of the Padishah*), *A kőszívű ember fiai* (*The Baron’s Sons*) - drew on Hungarian history and revived the traditions of national courage and independence struggles in the face of the invaders. Novels of manners - *Az aranyember* (*Timár’s Two Worlds*), *Fekete gyémántok* (*Black Diamonds*), etc. - and the Utopian phantasy *A jövő század regénye* (*A Novel of the Coming Century*) enhanced his reputation and increased his popularity. Towards the end of the century, Jókai was the uncrowned prince of Hungarian letters; and, despite his faults, which drew the censure of critics (loosely-knit and rambling plots and romantically rough-sketched characters that are either of angelic goodness or unmitigated scoundrels) his books were eagerly read, and for a long time he was the most popular writer in Hungary.

The strong appeal of his writings springs no doubt from his excellence as a spinner of yarn. In his great talent for plot-hatching he is a close neighbour of the great French romanticists, above all Victor Hugo. His unmatched, poetic fancy conjured up images of distant worlds for the public of a backward Hungary. His intimate knowledge of detail, of the many little phenomena of life, gives authenticity to his novels and stories. Romanticism and realism, patriotism and the beauty of the tale are all blended in Jókai’s lifework.

## THE TWO WILLOWS BY THE BRIDGE

Between Felvinc and Nagyenyed, a small mountain brooklet, now spanned by a permanent stone bridge, crosses the road. On either side of the bridge, at the water's edge, stands an enormous willow: and there is a historical event connected with those two willows. Seven generations have seen them grow, and their story has been handed down from father to son and is remembered to this day as if it had happened in our lifetime.

It is now just a hundred and fifty years since the *Kuruts-Labants* war<sup>1</sup> was *à la mode*, with the *Kuruts* forces setting the rules at Nagyenyed one day, and the *Labants* fighters taking over the next. As the former went out at one end of town, the latter came in at the other.

The citizens of Nagyenyed could not get it out of their heads that it would have been far, far better if these good people had gone to see one another instead of calling on *them*; but their visitors were worldly-wise gentlemen who had some notion of the strategic ruse according to which one way to beat an enemy is to strip the countryside of its victuals. It was this concept which they put into practice.

For while the regular armies of the Prince<sup>2</sup> - the cream of the nobility, with their banners, stalwart hussars with wolves's skins slung over their backs, picked heyducks, and guardsmen, in their red-and-blue uniforms - were fighting pitched battles against the main body of the imperial forces, composed of shining cavalry, mail-clad and crested, of dragoons in embroidered buff-hides, and sharp-shooting musketeers, while all this was going on over there in Hungary<sup>3</sup>, idle soldiers of fortune roamed the countryside, so very much alike in their looks that it was impossible to tell the *Kuruts* from the *Labants*.

They were, for the most part, people who had themselves been ruined by the war and whom despair, destitution and a thirst for revenge had left no other choice than to take up their scythes or pickaxes and join either the *Kuruts* or the *Labants* camp, according to whose soldiers had made them destitute.

Bands of these vagrants went from town to town, extorting money and looting wherever they met with submissive inhabitants; indulging in arson, where their anger was roused, and taking to flight as soon as they were scared. They could hardly be called enthusiastic fighters; and the vanquished would as a rule go over to the side of the victors, so that, on Mihály Cserei's<sup>4</sup> evidence, there were men who had been on and off the *Kuruts* side four or five times and as many times in and out of the *Labants* camp.

Such frequent alterations of quality must have been a serious obstacle in the quest for glory; for if you had made a good name for yourself, you could never be sure that, if your entire host happened to go over to the other side one day, the enemy might not see fit to spare them all and to hang you, as the most highly prized object of his revenge.

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<sup>1</sup> Anti-Hapsburg war of independence in the 18th century,  
Kuruts = the anti-Hapsburg forces.  
Labants = the pro-Hapsburg forces.

<sup>2</sup> Prince Ferenc II Rákóczi (1676-1735), leader of the anti-Hapsburg war of independence.

<sup>3</sup> Nagyenyed being in Transylvania, then an independent principality.

<sup>4</sup> A historian from Transylvania (1667-1756).



However, a way out of this predicament was found by assuming false names, by a practice mainly cultivated by the *Labants* fighters, who strove to find aliases for themselves over which those *Kuruts* nincompoops would twist their tongues - names which more often than not were corrupted German words that they themselves did not understand.

The *Kuruts* “pashas,” on the other hand, sought to assume Wallachian names.

At that time, the most ominous menace that hung over Nagyenyed and the towns of the neighbourhood was represented, on the one hand, by the *Kuruts* leader Balika, who had taken up his abode in a cavern in Torda Gorge, still referred to as “Balika’s Fort,” and on the other, by the two *Labants* chiefs who had their quarters in the Mezőség<sup>5</sup>, and one of whom bore the queer name of “Traitzigfritz,” while the other was more romantically called “Borembukk.”

Such were their assumed names, such, too, were those who bore them - fellows, now clumsy, now ruthless, half facetious, half sanguinary, of whom many amusing stories - and no fewer horrible ones - were bruited about, and whose names on the lips of nurses served as bugbears for frightening naughty children and in the mouths of roguish Nagyenyed students as epithets for jeering at each other.

Oh, those students! They were peculiar young fellows, those students of Nagyenyed!

As soon as a Calvinist lad had learned the art of making quill-pens out of goose-feathers, his mother would fill up a haversack with scones for him, and his father would buy him a pair of top-boots and take him to Nagyenyed, where, having put him down in the quadrangle of the college, having boxed his ears and given him his blessings, he would leave the boy to his own devices. Thereafter, it was up to the lad whether he would become a minister or a professor, King’s Magistrate, Chief Warden, or councillor; and the father’s worries about his son would be over. The lad grew up, acquired whiskers, became stout, crammed as he was with food and knowledge, was sealed off hermetically from all worldly temptation, had both body and soul taken care of, was educated in faith and good health, and made a clergyman, professor, King’s Magistrate, Chief Warden, or councillor - in line with his mental faculties or his good luck, without causing the least concern to his father and mother. The College became his mother.

This respectable matron had some five or six hundred foster sons and an income of several hundred thousand forints to pay for their education; it possessed the most learned professors, products of foreign universities; a world-famous library and all kinds of endowments, which, while stimulating the youths to diligence, soon enough instilled in them the salutary consciousness of having learnt to earn their own livelihood, modest though it was, according to their deserts.

The Rector of Nagyenyed College was at that time the Right Honourable Master Gerson Szabó of Torda, a great scholar, an exceptionally peaceable gentleman and a tireless upholder of virtuous ways.

For, once he had established himself among his monstrous folios, he became so utterly absorbed in them that he would often ask his wife whether he had had his dinner, yet to his pupils he was an oracle. His inclinations drew him only towards such quiet and peaceful sciences as astronomy and mechanics, while he had a dislike for history as a science which - in his words - taught nothing but the names of men and women who excelled in slaying their fellow beings, praised the exploits of the sinful, the sanguinary and the ruthless and filled its

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<sup>5</sup> District in Transylvania.

boundless expanse with lies, instead of improving posterity through upholding the example of pious men, of benefactors of mankind, and of sages.

In his repugnance to particular historical personages, he even did not hesitate to falsify the past for the spiritual welfare of his students, enjoining the professor of history to depict Cleopatra, Semiramis and other such shameless hussies, as ugly, detestable monsters, the very thought of whom should be enough to fill one with loathing.

Never were the students allowed to cast their eyes upon a female shape; dancing, the sound of the fiddle and other vain diversions, were banished once and for all from their midst; even in church, to keep them from ogling the girls, a space behind the pews was partitioned off for the older students, who sat there on trimmed fir trunks, to keep their heads lower than the elbow-rests of the pews in front of them. For the right honourable rector professed the rockfast principle that a young man yet unable to marry, that is, while he was still prosecuting his studies and could not afford a well-feathered nest of his own, had no need to know a woman, and whatever happened in the meantime was vanity and would lead to nothing good.

It need hardly be said that this was the most unpopular view one could proclaim for the sake of the public weal, and that it found the fewest adherents among those most concerned - the students of Nagyenyed. After all, one could not help seeing a female figure once in a while, and any woman seems beautiful to a young man between fourteen and twenty years of age.

A particular difficulty in applying Master Gerson's educational maxim was the circumstance that he himself had a daughter, and she was so beautiful that you might go picking and choosing through the town for half a year and yet come back to her in the end.

All the students who happened to behold this girl invariably fell in love with her; but their love was wasted, because it would be easier for one of the damned to flee back across the Styx than for a student to come within twenty steps of Kláríka - for that was the beautiful maiden's name.

Master Gerson had a one-storied house next to the college, with his own chambers on the ground floor, and his daughter's rooms occupying the first. A grill barred the passage to the stairs, so that it was out of the question for some young man, on his way to see the professor, to stray into Kláríka's vicinity. And anyhow he would have done so in vain for the good girl had been brought up in such fear of both God and students she would surely have fled at the sight of the young man.

Nor did any simple mortal have free access to the learned professor's house; but for tried and tested personages his door was thrown open.

Two such tried and tested personages were the young students of the humanities, Joseph Zetelaky and Aaron Karassiy.

The former was a handsome youth of seventeen with the face of a virgin. He was a special favourite of Master Gerson's, who believed him to have confined his spirit among the books of science more securely than if he had put it behind bars or preserved it in alcohol. He always held first honours and wrote all manner of verse on any subject, making use with equal dexterity of hexameters, pentameters or alexandrines, or of Sapphic, Alcaic, or Anacreontic lines. It goes without saying that there were no love poems among these compositions, which sang of Winter, Spring, the Harvest, Lightning and similar lofty subjects. In addition, he spoke fluent Greek, Latin, Hebrew and French; knew every star in the sky and each flower in the fields; served as assistant to Mr. Gerson in the latter's chemical or physical experiments; and was, besides, a young man of such devout sentiments that, when called upon in class to recite

the passage relating to a certain goddess who is wont to wear but scanty apparel, he would blush and cast down his eyes.

The other student, Karassiay, was a somewhat slow-witted fellow, taciturn and mild-tempered, a gownsman of six years' standing, who was high in Mr. Gerson's favour, because his name never figured in any spree or brawl; which, if it had, would have been disastrous since he was blessed by Nature with such arms and shoulders as, had he set them in motion to the misfortune of others, might have given them cause to recollect the occasion for a long time. Instead, he expended his stupendous strength only in the peaceful art of woodwork, fabricating all sorts of instruments for the professor. The capacity of his arms for other movement was evidenced only when, during the long vacation, the students would arrange mythological plays in the Big Hall - with a male cast, of course, and before a male audience - on which occasions Karassiay would play Hercules, and Zetelaky would play Dejaneyra so naturally that no one would have taken Joseph for other than a girl, while it was sheer delight to watch Aaron, in his fight with the Centaurs, floor some thirty heathen demi-gods all by himself.

The General Examinations were drawing near, and the Honourable Master Gerson Szabó of Torda was making tremendous preparations for his scientific demonstrations, designed to show how water is turned into air, how a pair of hemispheres, converted into a vacuum, will cohere; how air can be ignited; and how paper mannikins can be made to dance under the electrifying machine; performances that passed for miracles in those days. For this reason he handed over the keys of the physics cabinet to his chosen ones, that they might busy themselves there with their usual diligence. And indeed, he noted that the two excellent young men entered the cabinet the first thing in the morning, and that only night would see them emerge. "What commendable diligence!" said Mr. Gerson haranguing his other students, "You should take them as an example, you wicked, vainglorious, good-for-nothing drunkards, that you may become as they are."

Let us see what our two youths were doing in the physics cabinet. This cabinet had a window which could be darkened for the purpose of optical experiments, a window that gave right onto the yard of the Honourable Master's house. Our two diligent young men were standing at that window, and, applying an immense wheeled telescope to its round opening, seemed to be examining something through it with absorbed attention. Was it the stars they were observing? Possibly yes. But then, why should they level the telescope downwards?

Just now it was Joseph's turn, and he was looking through the lens, enraptured. "My God, what a lovely sight!" he sighed, unable to restrain himself. Was it a star then? "Now she's picking a rose. How I wish I were that rose!" No, it could not be a star after all!

Our brave young men, under the pretext of observing the stars, occupied themselves all day long with admiring beautiful Kláríka through the telescope.

While Mr. Gerson was deceiving himself in the belief that they were exerting their eyes upon the wonders of the firmament, the two young men entertained themselves by following the charming maiden with their telescope wherever she went into the garden, the rooms and the kitchen - feasting their eyes on her.

For our good Aaron this pastime was mere fun, but Joseph became so absorbed in it that he could not tear himself away from the telescope. When he lost sight of the girl for a while, he could neither eat nor sleep, took no interest in anything, and kept sighing and forgetting everything he had read; he even, to the utter consternation of Mr. Gerson, paid no attention in class, for then, too, his thoughts flew back to the little garden with the rose arbour and to the

beautiful maiden gathering the petals of the full-blown roses with her tiny white hands and dropping them into her little apron.

Even during the experiments he would heap blunder upon blunder, breaking things, smashing everything he laid his hands on. In experimenting with phosphorus he used hydrogen instead of oxygen, nearly blasting the whole class out of the room.

Mr. Gerson was thoroughly perplexed. He had no idea what might be the matter with the boy. He searched and investigated and found nothing. By the time he had clip-clopped down the whole length of the long corridor, to the cabinet, everything there was always in its place again - telescopes turned skyward and alembics and airpumps operating normally.

Meantime, the sorrow in Joseph's heart grew day by day. Sometimes the deceptive telescope brought the adored maiden so close to him that he would stretch out his hands towards her in ecstasy, drawing them back with a start only as the windowpane hit his fingernails, which made Aaron nearly double up with laughter.

Amidst these torments, the evil spirit of temptation induced the pious young man to sit down at the desk one afternoon and - perish the thought - write a love-poem! The poem was in Sapphic stanzas and abounded in all the beauty under the sun. Aaron, on hearing him recite it, swore that he had never heard of a finer poem in his whole life.

One evening the two youths, leaning on their elbows at the window of the cabinet and gazing up at the moon, had a heart-to-heart talk.

"If only she could read that poem," Aaron said.

"Umph," Joseph answered. (Such a thing was not easily done in those days, when there were not yet seven magazines available, in which to get a poem printed.)

"If I were you, I would get it into her hand somehow."

"Yes, but how?"

"Well, I'd throw it into the garden."

"All right. But what if the wind should blow it away and drop it into the yard to be picked up by Mr. Gerson?"

Now it was Aaron's turn to say Umph.

"The thing to do," said Joseph, sighing, "is to fold the paper neatly and hide it among the budding roses, so that when she comes from the house early in the morning to gather rose petals, she will find it and read it."

"That's easy enough," Aaron said. "You can lower yourself by a rope from this window to the garden wall, and from there you can easily jump down into the soft earth where it has been dug up; then, to come back, you can hold on to the elder tree and use the rope again."

"What!" Joseph exclaimed, horrified. "Use a rope to lower myself from the college window? Climb over other people's fences at night? No indeed!"

Aaron himself was frightened at these words.

"Well," he said, "I didn't say you should *do* it. I only said it would be easy."

Joseph remained silent for some time, then suddenly said:

"Do you know where one could find a long piece of rope here?"

“Do I! Why, there’s the old bell-rope up there in the loft.”

“Go and fetch it down.”

Aaron went to get the rope, tied a club to one end as a sort of saddle, made Joseph sit upon it and, winding the rope around the mullion of their window and holding it with his sinewy hands, lowered him down bit by bit to the stone wall. Not for a moment did Joseph seem to be worried that the rope might slip from his companion’s hands, causing him to break his neck; if there was anything he feared, it was only that he might be seen.

But nobody saw him. He was able to climb over the wall, hide the poem among the roses, and again clamber back to the cabinet window by the rope in Aaron’s hands, without suffering the least harm. And now they could only gape at each other, dumbfounded by the foolish thing they had done.

Next day they dared not look at each other, and even less into the telescope. Like two men guilty of some foul murder, they were afraid even to go near the spot of the crime, and it was with pounding hearts that they heard the tap-tap of Master Gerson’s boots approaching along the corridor.

Master Gerson entered. Neither Joseph nor Aaron had the courage to look up at him, both of them convinced that the professor might read the story of the nocturnal escapade from their very nosetips.

“Please to step this way, *humanissime*!<sup>6</sup> I want a word with you.”

Zetelaky was more dead than alive. He would not for all the world look at the professor, who measured him in ruthless silence.

“What I wish to tell you, *humanissime*,” he said at last in a dry voice, “is that next time you wish to deliver a poem, you will kindly enter by the door, and not by way of the fence, lest you trample my tulip-beds again. As for the poem you wrote, it is not bad, only your Adonic seems to me a little clumsy in one place.”

With these words he thrust the poem in question into the student’s hands. Joseph would not have objected if the earth had swallowed him up, college and all.

Kláríka had found the poem in the place where he had hidden it, but, like the good girl she was, had thought it her paramount duty to tell her father and to complain about the spoiled tulip beds at the same time. The old gentleman had at once recognized the handwriting and seen through Joseph’s wily scheme. Henceforth, experiments were no longer entrusted to that unhappy youth, nor was he ever again sent to work in the cabinet.

Meanwhile it happened now and then that matters other than what was printed in their books came to the knowledge of the student body, and news often seeped through of events that were taking place in the country. The students made no attempt to hide their sympathies or antipathies in the struggle going on between the *Kuruts* and the *Labants*. What is more, it might sometimes be judged from certain indications among the two or three hundred assembled in the hall before the lectures began that if it came to fighting, this elect body would not remain an idle spectator.

The desired opportunity soon presented itself. One day, Their Excellencies the noble lords Traitzigfritz and Borembukk sent word to the town that they required the immediate despatch to their camp of a hundred head of beef cattle, fifty quintals of bacon, one thousand

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<sup>6</sup> Upper-form students of the college were addressed “*humanissime*.”

loaves of bread and twelve leather bags of curd - not forgetting wine, of which no more than 2,400 gallons were desired. The food supply of the good people of Nagyenyed had by that time run so low that they had to stint themselves to the utmost, in order to scrape together the quantities demanded; and when they were about to load the lot onto carts, Balika, having got wind of the whole business, sallied forth from his lair, swooped down on the transport and carried off the provisions into Torda Gorge.

“What was to be done now?” - the good people of Nagyenyed asked themselves. In vain did they tell Traitzigfritzig that Balika had carried off the victuals, and that he should go after him and take them away from him - the *Labants* leader flew into a rage, had his men assembled, and swore that he would have Nagyenyed burnt to ashes and drink up the blood of the entire population in lieu of the wine.

The unhappy citizens were seized with terror on account of these cruel threats; yet, anxious as they were to meet his demands it was utterly impossible to do so. Traitzigfritzig and his horde, however, had now reached Marosújvár, and from the manner in which they had treated the villages through which they passed, the inhabitants of Nagyenyed could well guess what was in store for them.

Such a state of distress was no novelty for Nagyenyed. On learning of the approach of the *Labants* band, the inhabitants at once left their homes, after having buried their valuables in their cellars or under cornstacks; the women, children and old people were sent up into the wooded hills, and the maidens were assembled and locked up in the Calvinist church. The able-bodied men took up their stations in the courtyard of the same church which was encircled - as it still is today - by a strong and high stone wall and fortified by several bastions, the towers of which had been built by the different local guilds: one by the Loyal Society of Bootmakers; another, by the Loyal Corporation of Weavers, yet another, by the Tailors' Guild; the fourth, jointly by the Tanners' and Shoemakers' Guilds; the fifth, by the Buttonmakers' and Goldsmiths'; and the sixth by the Blacksmiths' and Locksmiths' Guild. In these bastions were kept the chests of the guilds, and, at times of grave peril, it was to these strongholds that the guild-masters and their journeymen repaired to guard the Refuge of God.

Right opposite rose the compound of the college, a vast three-storied building with four wings, which lodged seven hundred students - a whole army if it came to the test.

As soon as the news that spread about town reached the college, youthful passion flared up in the students' hearts. “Stand fast! We'll defend our town!” they shouted enthusiastically; and, next morning, at the chemistry class, the Honourable Gerson Szabó was astounded to see his students filing into the lecture room armed with swords and pikes, and insisting that their professors lead them against the *Labants* army.

A singular notion indeed! The Honourable Gerson Szabó to lead people into battle, indeed!

“Have you gone out of your minds, *dilectissimi*?” said the good gentleman in consternation. “Go and take *purgantes pectora succos*!<sup>7</sup> Do you think I am Ajax, or the rabid Achilles, that you want me to go to war? Or have I, perhaps, reared in you a generation of Myrmidons, that you should harbour such bloodthirsty schemes? You whose hands are accustomed to the leaves of books, are now to brandish spears? You who have been taught only to sing, should now contort your lips in yelping war cries? Have I imparted to you so much philosophy and science only to see you want only slain by a barbarous enemy, like any common, ignorant soldier who was born to be killed?”

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<sup>7</sup> Liquid to restore one's equilibrium. (Ovid, Ex Ponto, lib. IV, epist. iii, 53.).

In the course of this tirade Master Gerson became aware that even Zetelaky was concealing some sort of blade under his gown, and so gave the young man a fierce tongue-lashing.

“What!” he shouted. “Even thou bearest arms? Thou?” (When he began to say “thou,” it meant that he was in a very bad temper.) “The righteous order of things has broken down! Why, have poets - the chosen ones of the Muses, dwellers of the sacred groves, friends of the Pierians - ever been known to brandish weapons? Speak up, young man! Thou art a great historian, and I challenge thee to name but one instance thou knowest of!”

The student, thus assailed, replied at last:

“There was indeed such an instance: when the disciples of Pan took up clubs, fell upon the Gauls that were ravaging Mount Helicon, and slew them.”

Master Gerson jerked his head back at these words, for he had been given an unexpectedly smart answer, and that made him all the more furious.

“I forbid you, for my part, to take up arms at a time when the honourable Council of this town is making every effort to avert the menace through peaceful negotiations! And as for thee, *humanissime* Zetelaky, all I have to say is that one should not feel, called upon to answer every question. And now I bid every one of you to lay down all weapons this very instant. Whoever acts contrary to my order shall be expelled from this college and never again be re-admitted - *Clarissimi domini iurati*, go and have the cracked bell rung!”

It was customary to toll that cracked bell when a student was solemnly sent down from college.

Deep silence followed the rector’s words, which was broken only by the rasping of the cracked bell. The students, who would have been capable of engaging an army six times their number, now, at their professor’s command, tamely laid their arms down one by one. The cracked bell stopped clanging, the students went back to their seats and took out their books, and the honourable professor picked up his manual and proceeded to read his lecture as though nothing had happened, until the hour-bell was sounded; then he dismissed his pupils, and saw to it that the confiscated swords and spears were loaded upon carts and locked away in the vaults beneath the church, so as to make them inaccessible.

But at night, having recovered from the fear which the rector’s words had put into them, the students again conspired, and, since their weapons had been taken from them, went out to the river Maros as soon as the gates were opened in the small hours of the morning. From the strong willow trees growing on its bank each student cut himself a good cudgel, which he smuggled into the college concealed under his gown, and hid in the timber-yard. Cudgels, they thought, were not the worst of weapons, provided they were wielded by good men.

That same day, at noon, Traitzigfritzig appeared in the outskirts of the town with a *Labants* force of about three thousand men; the venerable Town Council appointed the Mayor, and the college board the Honourable Rector, to go in deputation to meet him.

The deputation was received by Traitzigfritzig on horseback; the rest of his army consisted of foot soldiers, and there were three wooden cannons, drawn by buffaloes. It was, however, highly questionable whether the cannons could be fired without endangering the lives of those standing round it. There was even a fourth cannon - of brass, this one - which some party had once spiked and abandoned on the battlefield; they had removed the spike with a drill, so that, when they fired the cannon, the charge came shooting forth through the touch-hole, leaving the ball inside the bore.

The host itself presented a priceless sight - to say that it consisted of "picked troops" was a fitting epithet, for they had been "picked" from among all the nationalities of the country, Magyars, Wallachians, Germans, Serbians, Gipsies, with a sprinkling of professional marauders, all thrown together in it in one mass; some barefooted and helmeted, others with sabres tied over their sheepskin coats; some carrying big muskets without lock or wheel and each wearing trimmed mustachios, so that in a *mêlée* they could distinguish their own comrades from the *Kuruts* host, which was made up of much the same sort of people, but all of whom flaunted long hair and long, waxed mustaches that reached to their ears. The greater part had on rough sheepskin sandals, only the officers disporting shoes, for the most part supplied with spurs which, in the absence of horses, served no other purpose than to trip up their owners when they were on the run.

Such was the army of which Traitzigfritz was the commander; but to suppose that he was like his ragged host, would be a grave mistake; his horse was a fine English stallion, he wore a shirt of mail, made of silver-starred rings, over a gold-laced cherry-red dolman, his brow was protected by a brass casque with a sterlet-shaped neck-piece, and his hands, sheathed in scale armour gauntlets, rested on the hilt of his long sword.

That he had come into possession of all this splendour neither by right of birth nor on his merits was written all over his broad, indolent face and ignoble features; and every item of his horse's harness and of his clothing had the initials of a different name embroidered on it, but this did not in the least prevent him from giving himself an air of sufficient dignity, when mounted, to speak disdainfully to those who walked on foot.

His lieutenant, Borembukk, was a hefty butcher's assistant with smooth-skinned, bony cheeks, who, unlike his superior, seemed to take special care to make his appearance as grimy as possible. His leather jerkin was caked with filth, and his countenance might well boast of never having come in contact with water other than showers from heaven.

His whole armament consisted of an enormous pole-axe, with which he was capable of striking down a bullock with one blow.

It was before these worthy men that the two-member deputation appeared with great reverence, hats in hand; and, in order to express their deep respect, Master Gerson addressed the two commanders with a well-contrived peroration in Latin.

Traitzigfritz glanced at Borembukk, and the latter glanced back at him - and though neither of them knew a word of Latin, they yet pretended to have understood everything that was spoken.

"I have well understood what you have spoken," the leader said as he perceived that Master Gerson had come to an end, and condescendingly patted the latter's shoulder. "What is your name?"

"My name is Gerson Szabó of Torda, professor and rector of the venerable College; and this my companion is the Honourable János Tóth, Mayor of our noble Municipality."

"And where's the bootmakers' guild-master?"

"He did not find it expedient to join us, sir."

"Yet he ought to have come, because my army has need of three thousand pairs of boots, which must be delivered within three days, or, by the sword of my ancestors," (he had stolen it somewhere) "I will kill off every bootmaker in the world!"

A bolder pledge, I believe, has never been made.



Master Gerson bowed his head, and the Mayor now began to speak, in Hungarian.

“We shall not fail to convey Your Excellency’s will to the honest guild-master, and he will do everything in his power. However, we beg you, on behalf of the entire community, graciously to keep your valorous army beyond the confines of the town, for, although we personally have the highest opinion of yourself, the foolish populace are nevertheless so mightily scared of men in arms that, on learning of your approach, they have all fled to the woods or shut themselves up in the churches; and so, even were you to enter the town, you would find nothing but abandoned houses, and you’d make it impossible for us to fulfil your demands, as there’d be nobody on whom to levy them.”

Traitzigfritzig whispered something into Borembukk’s ear, and, with an ill-concealed foxy smile, spoke as follows:

“O ye loyal subjects. Since, to wit, you being scared fools, and, to wit, we being desirous that your houses be not empty and nobody to be found in said; therefore, and whereas, returning to your town, tell ye to the people that, item, we clear out if they clear in; whereafter eminently, yet respectively and immediately, we pitch camp here, a thousand paces outside of town; and, item, ye have candles lit in every house, that we thereby may see ye be all inside; else, if thus and so, or, happen, this and that, you’ll see what you will see.”

Having with such eloquence delivered his ultimatum to the deputies, the commander dismissed them, and they returned to town, while he moved with his army some thousand paces from the city, to a field, where his soldiers built themselves tents from sheaves of corn.

And on their return the deputies told the inhabitants to go back to their homes and place candles in their windows at night, and to collect what little their poverty could still afford to satisfy the *Labants* gentlemen.

They did as they had been told: the guildsmen dispersed to their homes, the women and old people who had fled to the woods were called back, and, throughout the town, there was no end of cooking and baking till far into the night - all for the worthy *Labants*’.

But the lovely Kláríka, in the name of the young maidens, who had been accommodated in the church, besought the favour of being allowed to remain for the night in the safe embrace of God’s house, and, since this request was supported by all the other virgins, the Municipality and the professors consented at last.

A lovely, moonlit night descended upon the town, stillness reigned over the whole countryside, and the aldermen were quietly slumbering in their canopied beds, filled with a sense of the wisdom they had shown in averting a great menace from their town. In the church, three hundred and fifty virgins were reposing in God’s holy shadow, when it seemed to Kláríka in her dream as if a human form woke her, bidding her not to sleep but go up into the steeple.

Drowsily, she climbed the stairs to the belfry where the bell of the congregation, weighing eight hundred and twenty stones, was hanging, and as she looked out of the tall window of the tower into the moonlit night, she thought she saw a large, dark something, rolling slowly towards the town; it was not long before she made out a huge mass of people, above whose heads innumerable scythes and pikes gleamed metallically in the moonlight.

And suddenly, everything became clear to her: the *Labants* army had only been waiting for the inhabitants to return to their homes and go to bed, in order to make a treacherous raid on them.

Kláríka, not wishing to lose a minute, did not go down into the church to wake up her companions, but seized with a sudden inspiration, grabbed the rope of the heavy bell, for the purpose of tolling it and alarming the whole town.

The girl's arms were weak, but peril gave her strength, and, her white hands clutching the thick rope, she swung the heavy bell, which two men together would ordinarily find it difficult to move. And ere the horde had reached the town, the alarm signal boomed forth, and in an instant all the people were up and, as though by previous agreement, the womenfolk and old people again fled to the woods, while the men hastened to the bastions of the church, so that when the *Labants* troops entered the town, they once more found empty houses.

Thus outwitted, Traitzigfritzig flew into a rage and gave orders for the town to be set on fire forthwith at twelve different points. But no sooner had his men set their hands to this evil task than there was a heavy downpour which put out every flame immediately, leaving the *Labants* chief cursing both God and the Devil for his bad luck.

Morning came, and the Rector and the Mayor once more appeared before him. The *Labants* chief did not give them time to speak a word, but denounced them and their fellow burghers for double-dealing, deceitful scoundrels who would cheat honest folk, and swore by all the gods that he would draw up his four cannons and make a shambles of the whole town, church, college and all, put the inhabitants to the sword, and deliver all the maidens to his soldiers, unless the one who had tolled the bell were surrendered to him.

"The one you refer to happens to be my daughter, Your Excellency," Master Gerson replied, woebegone. "But if I can ransom our town at the price of my daughter's life, I am prepared to deliver her up to you. I have only one favour to ask of you: that you should have my head struck off first, so my eyes may not behold her misfortune."

"That favour shall be granted you," Traitzigfritzig said consolingly, and having given this assurance, he at once issued orders for the troops to surge into the town from every side. Himself grandly seated in his saddle, he placed the halter in the Mayor's hands, commanded him to lead his horse, and in this manner made his entry into the town; while Borembukk sat upon the shoulders of the professor and, applying his spurs to that dignified, white-haired gentleman's sides, had himself thus carried all the way to the market place in ghastly buffoonery.

The students in the college had a first-hand view of the whole scene, for the procession happened to halt right in front of them; but they had been locked in, and the key of the gate had been pocketed by Master Gerson himself.

Later on, they had to look on as the half-dead maiden Kláríka, the rector's daughter, was led out from the church-door and lifted by Traitzigfritzig into his saddle.

But that was more than a student's heart could bear.

"I'm going to kill everybody on earth!" Zetelaky shouted beside himself. "I'm going to slay them all myself!" and he bounded down the stairs four at a time, followed by Aaron and all the rest; in a trice the locked door was lifted out of its hinges, and a moment later, as from a disturbed beehive, out swarmed the students and fell upon the *Labants* marauders.

They wielded no more than willow cudgels, but whereas the *Labants* matchlocks had become useless through the downpour, the students' blazing wrath rendered the clubs heavy in their hands. Within one minute the *Labants* throng had been driven against the wall, and the bootmakers, who had grown bold at the first war cries, showered stones upon their heads.

When the two hard-pressed *Labants* chiefs perceived that things were taking a serious turn and that their men were tottering under the blows which the students dealt them, they turned their backs on the battleground and made haste to clear out of town. Traitzigfritzig put one arm round the maiden that had been placed in the saddle in front of him and galloped away with her, devouring with his eyes the charms that were to become his prey. Borembukkk had taken Master Gerson by the collar and dragged the worthy gentleman along with him as he sought safety with the aid of his long legs.

The *Labants* army was routed and scattered to the four points of the compass in less time than it would take to relate it.

The two commanders fled with a group of no more than thirty men in the direction of Felvinc, followed closely by swarms of students with their sleeves rolled up and hands gripping rough-hewn willow clubs. They had tucked their flowing black gowns in their belts and, supporting themselves on their cudgels, they took such tremendous leaps that they resembled English thoroughbreds.

The number of pursuers and pursued kept dwindling as pairs of fighters separated from their respective groups and remained behind locked in duel. Finally, but two pairs of antagonists were left - Traitzigfritzig and Borembukkk ahead, and Joseph and Aaron, hot on their heels. Of the former, one was riding his horse, while the other trusted to his long legs; but the horse had become exhausted under the double burden, and, as they came to the aforementioned little brook, the two leaders saw that to cross it was impossible because the cloudburst had washed away the bridge and the water was overflowing the banks.

“Ha, *Labants*!” cried Aaron, overtaking one of them. “There’s the end of the world for you.”

Borembukkk, seeing that there was no choice now but to make a stand, let go of Master Gerson’s collar, and, grabbing his pole-axe, fetched such a blow at Aaron that, had he not jumped aside, it would have severed his body in two. But the student returned the blow with his cudgel and rapped the *Labants*’ knuckles with such force that he dropped his pole-axe immediately. Thereupon the enraged *Labants* flung himself at the youth with his hands; and although the latter brought down his cudgel with a blow so mighty that it became bent and the *Labants*’ head swelled up to the size of a loaf, Borembukkk ignored the blow as if it were not he who had received it, and catching hold of the club sought to wring it from Aaron’s hands. But Aaron held on for dear life with both hands, and so they kept up a tug-of-war for some time until both became exhausted and stood there panting and trying to outstare each other.

“Well, student,” snarled the *Labants*, gnashing his teeth, “now you’ve met your master. Do you know who’s trapped you? Bo-rem-bukkk is his name!”

“But try to say mine!” Aaron retorted. “It’s Ka-ras-si-ay!”

“Ka-ras-si-ay!” cried the *Labants*, horrified. “Why, then, we’re both done for, you and me!” And with these words he tugged at his opponent, with all his might, and they both plunged from the high bank into the swollen brook. The water closed over their heads.

In the meantime Joseph, too, had caught up with Kláríka’s abductor; the rider, realizing that there was no escape, dismounted and, unsheathing his sword, turned to face Joseph, who was advancing in dumb fury.

“Go home to your mamma, you milksop!” he yelled out at the beardless youth. “Or I’ll clip off your hands and feet!”

Zetelaky, without deigning to answer, spat in his hands and, grasping his club in the middle, stepped boldly up to the ironclad chief with the forbidding countenance.

“What the devil! Away with you!” the chief fulminated beside himself and lashed out fiercely with his sword. But Joseph gave a twist to his cudgel, one end of which swept the sword aside with a clang, while the other struck the helmet with a bang!

Traitzigfritzig, dazed by the blow, blinked vacantly as if trying to locate its source. He did not have to look far, for Joseph now grasped his cudgel with both hands and, swinging it at its opponent’s waist, laid him out full length. He dropped his sword and, his eyes goggling, tried to crawl towards his horse, whereupon Zetelaky, thinking his foe was out to kill his beloved one, who lay unconscious in the saddle, dashed over to the *Labants* chief and, trampling on his body, dealt him a final blow.

Not until now did he look around for his companions. They had all straggled behind; only the flap of a gown caught on a bush showed him that one of them must be there submerged in the brook. He rushed to the spot and pulled Karassiy out of the water by his gown. He and Borembukk were even then locked in relentless embrace, except that the student was still alive, and the *Labants* dead.

Then, with the assistance of Master Gerson, he sprinkled water upon Klárika and brought her round with sweet words; and at last the four of them went down upon their knees and thanked the Lord for their delivery.

The two willow cudgels, which had served to overcome their enemies, were planted in the bed of the brook to commemorate the event, and Master Gerson pronounced a blessing over the two weapons and over Joseph’s love as well. And the young man no longer had to observe his Klárika through a telescope when he wished to see her.

It is now a hundred and fifty years since these events came to pass, and the two willow trees are yet thriving at the water’s edge. Many years ago, the college had a house of repose built by those willow trees, and the students repairing there of a lovely summer day, would repeat the tale of the two willows and then sing, “God is our refuge and strength!”

1853

## KÁROLY EÖTVÖS

(1842-1916)

“Someone once called him a ‘great commemorator,’ as it was he who would bury people, deliver the funeral oration and write the obituary notice” - that was how Kálmán Mikszáth characterized Károly Eötvös. This ‘great commemorator’ of the second half of the nineteenth century was the chronicler of Hungary after the Compromise of 1867, recording as he did thousands of anecdotes and revealing stories. A lawyer and M. P., he spent his life at the House of Parliament, in coffee-houses, party clubs and court rooms. And all the while he talked and talked and collected his material - the most typical stories of the age. In moulding it into literature he altered but little of the facts of life. The best part of his work does not strictly comply with the set rules of any genre, most of his works being neither short stories, nor novels, but something of a cross between historical records and newspaper articles, coffee-house anecdotes and full-fledged *belles lettres*.

This lawyer so fond of his comfort hated to be disturbed by the noisy affairs of the outside world. But sometimes, when he discovered injustice, he would toll the bells. When at the end of the century, the antisemitic hue and cry of ritual murder was raised in the little village of Tiszaeszlár and reactionaries started a frame-up trial on the allegation that on Easter the Jews of the village had slain a Christian girl, Eötvös, throwing his full weight on the side of the persecuted, undertook their defence. He was the Zola of a Hungarian Dreyfus Trial, upholding the just cause of the downtrodden in the face of reactionary public opinion. His best piece of writing - *A nagy per* (The Great Trial) - is a record of his persevering and successful struggle.

## THE EVANGELIST OF THE HERMIT'S CAVE

In the Hermit's Cave at Tihany there once dwelled a man who praised the Lord, but did not by any means praise the landlord. And yet the landowner was hardly to blame for his fate.

His impish friends had called him the Double Evangelist, and there were those, too, who had adopted the term to taunt him with. Matthew was his family name and Mark was the name given him in holy baptism by the old minister at Kisszöllös. That is how he became Mark Matthew. He had as many names as the two evangelists together. So the imps and the taunters had not been entirely in the wrong in calling him the Double Evangelist. Still, what they had done was unseemly, for the name had eventually stuck to him, so that the young folks no longer knew his real name.

The Double Evangelist was born at Kisszöllös and was a Calvinist. How it came about, no one can tell, but a small cotter's holding fell vacant at Aszófő. It consisted of a cottage, a tiny garden and a small sloping vineyard, at the foot of which were a few plum trees surrounding a modest apiary consisting of five or six hives made of reeds.

The last cotter had left behind an orphan - a shock-headed, barefooted, sunburnt lass, whom the lonely Evangelist befriended.

Whether they were legally married or not, no one in the village knew for certain or cared. The two of them were a quiet, upright couple. They fulfilled their obligations towards the landowner, performed soccage service for the County without complaining, and kissed the hand of the parish priest, while the woman regularly went to confession and even attended the annual parish feast at Andocs. Thus did they live out their lives in peace. They lived to a ripe old age, until one day the wife passed away suddenly.

Barely had the Evangelist returned from the cemetery where his wife had been buried, when the town crier appeared and bade him come to the Village Hall.

There at the Village Hall was the bailiff from Tihany. He was a new bailiff and was inquiring into the affairs of the serfs and cotters around Aszófő, to see if he could discover any irregularities. In looking through the register, he had come across the Double Evangelist's holding. The register showed it to be still vacant. He had asked the magistrate why it was vacant. The magistrate had told him truthfully that it was not vacant for the Evangelist was living there. One question had led to the other, and in the end the magistrate had told the bailiff that he did not know when and how the Evangelist had come to occupy the cotter's holding, nor did he know what was his religion.

And so the Evangelist was ordered to appear at the Village Hall. He was an old man by this time and hardly strong enough to walk. His wife's death had crushed him still more. He did not so much walk as drag himself into the bailiff's presence.

"So you are the Evangelist?"

The bailiff was 25 years old and the aged cotter 75, yet the bailiff did not address him with the respect due to his advanced years. It was not the custom. The old cotter, holding his hat in his hand, leaned against the stove, otherwise perhaps his legs would not have supported him. He did not give any answer to that first question.

"How long have you been living in the cottage?"

"It must be some sixty years."

“How did you get there?”

“God gave it to me.”

“That’s of no consequence. Only the landowner can give it to you. What is your religion?”

“As long as I was able, I was a Calvinist. But now I am nothing, for I do not have the strength to walk to church at Szöllös or Füred.”

Aszófő is a pure Catholic village. Meticulous care was taken to keep out strangers or infidel Protestants. Moreover, the bailiff was a new man and wanted to show the landowner that he regarded religion as something holy and that he intended to keep the village pure. The Double Evangelist could not in any case prove his right to settle on the cotter’s holding sixty years ago. Obviously then, the law empowered the bailiff to dislodge the old cotter from the holding.

“Well, tomorrow you will leave the cottage, and stone-mason Birnbaum will move into it.”

“And you, sir,” he continued addressing the magistrate, “see to it that the old Evangelist takes nothing from the house or from the wine cellar in the vineyard, but leaves everything as it is.”

And the notary forthwith wrote stone-mason Birnbaum’s name beside the reference to the vacant cotter’s holding in the register.

The farmer-magistrate was also a good Catholic of German stock, and so it was natural for him to prefer his own flock to the headstrong Hungarian Calvinists. But by that time he had become pretty much of a Hungarian. Moreover, he had known the Double Evangelist all his life, and the latter was already a grown man when he himself was still making mud pies.

Now he sat there on the bench and for a long time did not respond to the words of the bailiff, but kept looking down and drawing arabesques with the staff of his office in the dust on the floor. He wanted to think things out before speaking.

“Who will harvest the grapes this year, your honour?”

“What a question! Birnbaum, of course. Who else should do it?”

The magistrate still did not look up. He kept on drawing his arabesques in the dust, while he considered what he should say next.

“What if we left him in the house for a few more days, your honour? Perhaps something might happen to give his fate a new turn. Otherwise the Evangelist will become a burden on the village as a beggar.”

The bailiff thought this over for a moment. Was it worthwhile to leave the aged cotter for a few more days in the house which had been his for sixty years and which he himself had built and maintained in good order? But before he had time to reply, the Evangelist spoke up.

“Have no fear, sir, I won’t be a burden on the village, and I will leave the house, I cannot stay there anyway now that my wife has been taken to the cemetery. But I do thank you for your kindness and ask God’s blessing upon you. If ever I did any wrong, I hope you will pardon me, Mr. Bailiff.”

He hobbled up to the magistrate and shook hands with him, whereupon he did the same with the notary and the town crier. Then he left the room. In the street he put on his greasy, fifteen year-old hat and went home.

A great weight fell from the magistrate’s heart. The bailiff did not give the matter another thought either, and turned to an examination of the other items on the list.

The Double Evangelist, for his part, seated himself on the porch as soon as he got home. The stump of a wild-pear tree served him for a stool. The walk had tired him, and it felt good to sit down. And, besides, he had to think about his lot, and an old man with lead in his limbs can think only in a sitting position. Every now and then tears trickled from his eyes. Why, oh why could not that poor wife of his have waited for him! How he had begged her not to hurry, had told her how good it would be if they could make that last journey together. And the old woman had listened to him for a while. Her eyes had looked and looked at him, the Evangelist, as in the days of their courtship. If only once more, just once more, she could open those eyes of hers.

The Double Evangelist wiped his face with the sleeves of his coarse dolman; he sat resting a while and then got up. He went into the house and looked about in the kitchen, room and pantry. There was a piglet he had been raising for Advent. He gave it food and drink and petted it. Just as his wife used to do. The dumb creature must not notice that the woman was already out in the cemetery. It must not cry after her.

Once more he went into the room. He slung his horsehair knapsack over his shoulder and stowed a few things in it. He put on his long felt coat and then went out, locking the kitchen door behind him and putting the key to the door into the knapsack.

He stepped into the yard. There was an old mulberry tree there. He had planted it forty years ago. Ah, he had then been a young man at the peak of his strength. He stopped by the mulberry tree and looked at the roof of the cottage. His hands had made that, too. It could stand a little repairing. The roof needed flanging and here and there a bit of patching with a few handfuls of reed. But then the house was no longer his. It no longer mattered in what shape the roof was. Let the new cotter, the stone-mason, worry over that.

But why was the house no longer his?

Since it was he that had lived in it for sixty years, he that had kept it in order and repaired it all this time, he that had inhabited it since his youth, why was he not allowed to die in it in peace? Why did they have to drive him from the house? After all, he was in nobody's debt.

The bailiff had ordered him to go. And when the bailiff commands, it is as if the landowner commanded. And the landlord was the abbot.

The abbot, Pál Horváth, was a decent, humane and pious old man. Or, maybe the County could do something for an old cotter.

Nonsense!

When had an aged cotter ever won a suit against the landlord, a Calvinist cotter against His Grace, the Abbot? And then - where did the County Counsellor live? How could he go there and present his case? When would the manorial court be in session? He would not live to see the outcome of his suit.

And even if he did live that long, even if he did win his suit, he would never again set foot in that house. His wife was no longer there. And without his wife he did not want the house, the vineyard or anything.

And life?

He did not want that either.

Next he went towards the wine cellar at the vineyard. He hobbled along slowly, and got there as the noonday bells were ringing.



He stopped at the foot of the vineyard. He looked at his plum trees. He had planted each one himself. But yellow moss covered them now. They too would not live much longer. The plums were turning ripe on the trees, but he did not touch a single fruit.

The vineyard consisted of two small plots. The grapes were turning yellow and red on the vines. Heaven was offering a good vintage. But not for him. God bless with it the stranger who would follow him! A grape doesn't amount to much, but not a single one did he pick from any of the vines. Yet he himself had planted them, had dressed and hoed them, and even this year his wife had tied them up, and trimmed them.

Poor woman, if she could only see the vineyard once more, just once more. But, alas, from the cemetery she could not come to see it.

He opened the door to the vault and looked about him there as well. Everything was in its place. He still had a small cask of his share of wine on tap. He filled a glass and gulped it down. But he did not refill the glass. Something seemed to have happened to that wine, it did not taste as it should. And yet it had neither clouded nor faded. A week ago it had tasted so good when he had been here with his wife. She too had drunk a glass and seemed to like it.

He turned to leave the vault and was about to shut the door when his eyes fell on his wife's reel on the beam of the press. And next to the reel lay an old blue headkerchief of hers.

He picked up the kerchief and looked at it for a long time. Once again tears filled his eyes and ran down his thin, wrinkled face. He couldn't help it - an old man is a weak man. He had to sit down for a while, for his legs would not support him when his heart was moved. Eventually he composed himself and put the kerchief in the knapsack.

He locked up the vault and took the key. Slowly he hobbled back past the cottage and went on to see the magistrate.

"Your honour, here is the key to my house and here is the key to the vault. I left everything in order. I gave food and drink to the pig and so it will manage till evening. And from now on you won't see me any more, I am moving. I am not of local stock, and I don't want to become a burden on the village. I thank you for all your goodness. If I have done anything wrong, please forgive me. I commend you to God."

The magistrate was having a glass or two with three companions. He offered a glass of wine to the Double Evangelist -and wished him Godspeed.

Henceforth the Evangelist was seen no more at Aszófő. Not a soul cared in the least. Nor did anyone see him at Balaton-Kisszöllös, where he was born. Indeed, he did not go there. It would have been useless to do so. He had left the village, as an orphan, sixty years ago. Who would have remembered him there? And he was not seen in the old church of the Calvinists at Balatonfüred. After all, there too they did not know him. Only the sexton would recall how now and then he had appeared at the service, sat down close to the door and dropped his penny into the collection plate.

But three or four days later he was found by young Ferkó Gelencsér.

Ferkó was pasturing his goats at the foot of the Old Castle in the vicinity of the Hermit's Cave. At that time the County still nobly permitted the serfs to keep goats. The goats were climbing the sheer cliffs along the shore to nibble at the thin twigs of the piperidge, spindle-tree, dogwood, maple and elder bushes; Ferkó was sunning himself by the waterside, and his dog was roaming about and sniffing at this and that.

All of a sudden the dog stopped in front of the Hermit's Cave and began to bark, his nose pointing towards the entrance. He barked and barked, and, while he was doing so, he time and again glanced back towards his little master.

Ferkó saw this, but paid no attention. He knew from the sound that the dog must have found something, but he thought there was a hedgehog in the cave and the dog was barking at that. And of course, he, Ferkó, would not climb up to the cave for a mere hedgehog.

Finally the dog realized that Ferkó would not understand him from so far away. So he climbed down from the cliffs, ran up to his little master and began to bark right beside him; and while he was barking, he pointed with his eyes, nose and ears toward the cave. Thus did he make his young master understand.

Ferkó walked up to the cave and found that an old man was lying in the entrance. He was covered with his long felt coat, his knapsack was under his head and his staff stood in a corner. His grey hair fluttered in the autumn breeze; he did not move, he did not speak, he only looked.

It was the Evangelist.

Ferkó raised his hat and greeted the old cotter.

"A good day to you, sir. What are you doing here?"

The Evangelist replied in a weak voice:

"I am resting, son."

"It will soon be midday, sir."

The Evangelist knew that very well, but he did not care. Evening would come, too.

"Give me a drink, son."

Ferkó went down to Lake Balaton, filled his gourd with water, and kneeling down, held it to the lips of the Evangelist. Perhaps the old man did drink a few drops, the rest ran down his beard.

"Take the knapsack from under my head, son, you will find bread and bacon in it. Have a bite and throw something to the dog, too."

"Thank you, sir, thank you very much, but we too have food with us."

He did not touch the knapsack. The Evangelist said nothing more, so the boy commended him to the grace of God, raised his hat again and went off to look after his goats.

The next day Ferkó Gelencsér again took his goats grazing at the same place, but by now he had put the cotter out of his mind. He supposed the old man must have had his sleep and rest, and have gone on. But the dog thought it proper to look up the old man, so he ambled up to the Hermit's Cave. And lo, the old man was still lying there. Ferkó must be told about this!

The Evangelist neither spoke nor moved, but lay there like yesterday. He was still looking, however.

Only now it occurred to Ferkó that perhaps something was wrong with the strange old man.

"Sir, shouldn't I speak to my master?"

The Evangelist answered in a mere whisper, as he no longer had the strength to speak.

"When I have had my rest, soon."

And that was that. Ferkó went his way, tending his goats, chasing after lizards, picking haws and looking for dogberries.

The Evangelist knew what he was doing. The cave also did not belong to him, but to the landlord. Everything was the landlord's. If they could drive him out of his house and vineyard, despite his having built it and planted it, why should they not drive him from the cave. The boy Ferkó would tell the farmer, the farmer the magistrate, the magistrate the bailiff, the bailiff the abbot. Suppose they would not leave him in peace even here?

And he wanted to rest, to rest for ever. He did not wish to be disturbed.

When a wild beast feels the end approaching, it digs itself into the earth, hides among the fallen leaves, retires into the depth of a cave or flees to the quiet darkness of a forest. It has no desire to be hurt by its enemies, to gladden those who envy it, or to be pitied by those of weak heart. And if wild animals may do this, might not an old cotter do likewise? When its death is near, even a cat will go up into the attic lest people see its agony. That was how the old Evangelist thought it all out in his own simple-minded way.

The next day Ferkó Gelencsér drove his goats to Pulpit Hill. He was nowhere near the Hermit's Cave.

But three or four days later he came back again to the vicinity of the cave. His dog once more visited the cave; however, when it stopped at the mouth, it no longer barked, but with its ears folded back and nose held high began to wail long and loud.

"The dog is upset about something."

Ferkó ambled up to the cave, and, lo, the old man was still lying there as he had been, covered with his long felt coat and the knapsack under his head, his staff in the corner. This time too he neither moved nor spoke, but now he was no longer even looking. Both his eyes were closed.

What if he is sleeping?

The boy was inexperienced. He did not know death from sleep.

But the dog knew.

The dog sniffed all over the old cotter, beginning at his boots and finishing at his head, and then at the knapsack under his head. And even the boy Ferkó knew that a dog does not sniff at the face of a live man. A live man might slap him for that.

Yes, the Evangelist was dead!

The leaves of the spindle-tree were still green at that season.

But its fruit had opened, its lovely, mitre-shaped, crimson and gold berries, lovely as the loveliest of flowers. The boy Ferkó broke off an armful, a whole lapful of spindle-tree branches and wreathed the peacefully resting body of the Evangelist with them.

At last the old man had found his eternal rest!

And were the landlord to come, were the bailiff to come, were they to give a peaceful cotter's holding to the Evangelist, - of what use would it be to him now. Let them show the fullness of their strength and their might, they who are not worth as much as the gold-and-crimson fruit of the spindle-tree. And even that - of what use is it to the old cotter?

The cave looks out upon Lake Balaton, into endless distance. An invisible mist weakens the rays of the autumn sun, and so the far off shore cannot be seen. But even so, the sunbeams

peep now and again into the cave, caressing the lined face of the Evangelist. The autumn wind flits in, unseen, ruffling the spindle-tree branches, and the grey beard and grey locks of the old man. Well, old cotter, don't be hurt at having been deserted by your fellow men - the sun, the breeze and the flowers of autumn have come to greet you.

And not even man has deserted you. That boy Ferkó came to see you every day with his dog. And when the boy drove the goats in the evening and told the story to his master, the next day a magistrate was there with the town crier and with two navvies to dig a grave on the waterside and bury you there.

Yes, there they were.

They examined the old cotter. They took his knapsack from under his head. It was full of stale food. They took off his long felt coat. His clothing had to be taken home to the village poor. They unbuttoned even his dolman and waistcoat.

And when they reached his bare old body, they found, above his heart, the bonnet, thimble and blue headkerchief of the old woman who had been his companion.

Whom he had loved once and loved for ever. Whom he had followed to the churchyard a week ago and without whom he could not go on living. And whose every treasure he had heaped upon his heart so that as long as that heart was beating the old woman should know it was throbbing for her.

They buried him. They left the bonnet, the thimble and the kerchief over his heart. On his tomb they rolled three stones to mark the place where his head was resting. When as a child I was shown the tomb of the Double Evangelist, there was no trace of the burial-mound, but the three stones were still there together. The burial mound had been carried away by the winds.

Today who remembers the poor Evangelist? Yet, today, who remembers even the mighty king?

Down below, at the waterside, the miserable cotter is buried, above, where the shore rises to a peak - the mighty king is buried. Above the head of one they rolled three stones, on the tomb of the other they built a twin-spired church. The winds have carried away the burial-mound of the miserable cotter and time will soon wear down the church, too. The winds are already corroding the cliffs on whose top stands the church. The rocks are crumbling and falling to dust, rolling down into the abyss, and in fifty or a hundred years the eastern side of the church will collapse, too. Unless they support the whole hill with big ramparts.

But what difference does it make? - The mighty king has turned into dust and ashes just as has the poor cotter. When the king was buried, the nation put a gold crown set with gems on his head. Yet what became of that crown? It was stolen, cut into pieces and squandered - it does not exist any longer. But you, poor cotter, no one will steal or squander the thimble of your old wife. That is still there under the earth and above your heart. True, the forces of nature will consume the thimble, too, but if the thimble is to perish some day just like the crown, what will be the difference then between the king and the cotter?

I do not know.

And yet I do know.

No one broods over the memory of the cotter, but hundreds and thousands brood over the memory of the king.

1901

## KÁLMÁN MIKSZÁTH

(1847-1910)

Born a year before of the outbreak of the Hungarian War of Independence against Austria, Kálmán Mikszáth lived at a period when not even the best minds of the nation saw a solution to Hungary's problems. It was the era of the "Compromise" (or reconciliation between Austria and Hungary, negotiated in 1867, by the Hapsburg dynasty and Hungary's ruling classes) when beneath the surface of apparent well-being and universal appeasement deep-set conflicts, social as well as individual, were at work. Mikszáth was a faithful chronicler of his era, even though he was pledged, partly by temperament, partly by political allegiance (he was a liberal politician and M. P.), to conserving the world in which he lived. His early stories, *A jó palóczok* (*The Good People of Palócz*), *A tót atyafiak* (*Our Slovak Kinsmen*), describe the life, the joys and sorrows, of poor village folk in a tone of gentle satire that now and then turns pleasantly sentimental. In his later writings he captured the grotesque features of a steadily decomposing feudal Hungary. His tone became increasingly harsh with satire, the idyllic sweetness of his earlier work was tinged with bitterness in a number of voluminous novels written towards the end of his life (*Különös házasság*, *A Strange Marriage*; *A Noszty fiú esete Tóth Marival*, *The Affair of Young Noszty and Mary Tóth*; *A fekete város*, *The Black Town*).

Mikszáth's prose is characterized by the informality of living speech, he consciously strove to enliven his writings through the use of popular idiom and the style of the amusing anecdote. This quality has earned for him the tag "the great talker." The nucleus around which he weaves his stories is supplied, for the most part (his lengthier works included), by some anecdote, a story from real life. Every now and then, the narrative is interrupted by fresh anecdotes from which new and equally amusing stories are developed, all of them enriching the main plot. His characters are excellently drawn, mostly with a strong flair for the comical or satirical, or with a touch of sentimentalism. For the most part, Mikszáth makes no comment - only seldom does he go to the length of flashing an indulgent smile and still more rarely does he give free rein to his passions. Yet the writer's presence is always felt - his work is shot through with the likeable attitude of a man well versed in the ways of the world but whose fresh and animated naiveté continually breaks through an assumed sophistication. This prevailing mood sets the tone for his style, in which turns of colloquial speech and poetic descriptions alternate with intentionally "unwieldy," circumstantial, involved periodic sentences that imitate the language of the anecdotist.

Mikszáth's impressive work is still favourite reading in Hungary and has won many readers in other countries. The most popular, besides the three big novels mentioned above, are a number of short masterpieces, such as *Az Új Zrínyiász* (*The New Zrinyiad*), *Beszterce ostroma* (*The Siege of Beszterce*), *Két választás Magyarországon* (*Two Elections in Hungary*), *Szent Péter esernyője* (*St. Peter's Umbrella*), and *Akli Miklós*. His chiselled, well-rounded short stories match his novels and prove that his forte was the narrative vein.

## PRAKOVSZKY, THE DEAF BLACKSMITH

### Chapter I GIRLS, NEIGHBOURS AND THE LIEUTENANT

All the week my grandfather would smoke his pipe and curse, my mother would be cross with him because of the pipe - for she had a weak chest and the smoke irritated her throat - whereas grandmother, a god-fearing woman, would be annoyed and keep quarrelling with him on account of his blasphemy.

“Oh, András, András! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself to abuse the Almighty, our Lord and Creator? It is dreadful to listen to you. Verily I say unto you, lightning will strike you one of these days, András.”

“God has more brains than you and me... hang it!” burst out grandfather. “You just leave it to the two of us. I know, what I’m doing!”

And indeed, the old man got on very well with God. God liked him, blessed him with a fine, long old age and gilded it with much joy; grandfather, on his part, did his best too, and having roundly abused the Lord for six days, on the seventh day he would shave, put on his smartest Sunday clothes, climb into a *britzka* and, in good or bad weather alike, drive to church in Krizsnócz, the third village from ours (there was no Lutheran congregation nearer than that). All morning he would piously sing hymns in praise of God. The abuse he had heaped upon the Divine Majesty all week, he took back on Sunday, and that was the end of it. For God, after all, is good... and his goodness lies in the fact that one can wipe a thousand curses off one’s blackboard with a single prayer.

As I grew a bit older he would take me with him to church, and I liked to go, at first, because he let me drive the horses on the straight road in the Uszác Valley - and this was great fun indeed. It would have been even greater if he had not always snatched the whip from my hand, for he took great pains to spare the horses, and nothing in the world would have induced him to let them run at a trot; the driving thus actually consisted of merely holding the reins - but even that was better than nothing - and sometimes I succeeded in speeding up the horses by lifting and flapping the reins a little.

The old man cursed and scolded me on such occasions.

“Why such a hurry? So you want to win a race, eh? Can’t you let the horses manage by themselves? Now listen, you good for-nothing little brat! Do you think I get a horse for mere chaff? Stop flapping those reins at once, I don’t want to drive right out of this world!”

Later on, when I was in secondary school, I used to drive with the old man to Krizsnócz only during the holidays, but then I was already interested in the young ladies, who sat there on both sides of the altar in the polished family pews... the offspring of the neighbouring county squirelings: the Misses Krúdy, two flaxen-haired girls; Vilma Folkusházy, a small snub-nosed damsel; the four comely Vér sisters, like organ-pipes, their lustrous black hair put up in a crown. And the one I favoured most, a girl with large, dreamy blue eyes: Piroska Gáll, lithe and slender as a deer.

Why did I like her most? God knows. Some of the Vér sisters were more beautiful, more suited to me, yet I liked Piroska best all the same. Maybe because she was the tallest and strongest. She must have been about twenty-two years old. I stared and stared at her during the

long, boring sermons and felt a peculiar thrill pass through my body; my eyes never left her, and I knew I would not have tired of looking at her for a hundred years. I came to the conclusion that if I should ever get married, this Piroska Gáll would be the wife for me, nobody else.

It is true, my grandmother (who was indeed very wise in matters of matrimony) had her own notions as to the best relative age. She said the bride ought to be half the age of the bridegroom and seven years in addition. Her manifold matchmaking experiences in the past had led her to this conclusion as to an invariable golden rule. According to this rule, the wife of a man of thirty ought to be twenty-two, the wife of a man of forty, twenty-seven, a man of fifty, however, ought to take a woman of thirty-two for a wife. She held this to be the moral foundation of a good marriage!

Now, I was only sixteen at the time, and according to grandmother's formula, I ought to have chosen a girl of fifteen. Who on earth wants a minx like that?

There was, then, a difference of seven years between us. But are seven years such an unbridgeable gap? After all, ten years, according to our history teacher, are but a minute in the infinity of time, and seven years are even less. Grandmother herself thought a happy marriage possible even with a difference of seven years, in exceptional cases.

In short, it would be quite all right, if Piroska Gáll would wait till I took my degree. Now, let's see, when would that be? Well, in about ten years' time. I shall be twenty-six by then, and Piroska thirty-two, while according to grandmother's rule, a man of twenty-six should take a wife of twenty; thus the difference will have grown to twelve years already, and that is more than a minute, even to our history teacher. Confound mathematics! This eternal disproportion will be the death of me...

But there was no way of overcoming it. Just the same, I still recall those Sundays with pleasure, and even today my heart beats a little faster when I think of the fair-browed village maidens, sitting there quietly, politely, their hats adorned with poppies, their simple cotton dresses so pretty and charming in my eyes...

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By and by I got to know the chief characters of this churchgoing flock: fat Márton Csury, who, as a rule, fell asleep and snored mightily during the sermons; Mrs. Buzinkay, the beautiful widow, who was absorbed in praying zealously and whose prayer book, one could see as she turned its pages with moistened fingers, was full of pressed flowers and lavender leaves...

The prayer books of the young ladies were like this too... But as yet they had fewer pressed flowers in them. Oh, those dear little books with their metal clasps!

Even now, after so many years, living almost entirely amongst books, I suddenly get sick of them and am overcome with a wondrous longing for a book filled with dry lavender leaves - instead of big ideas and great observations.

Maybe it is not even the prayer book that I thirst for; it is the memory of the village, of the small church, that is still trembling in my heart... I can see all those personages once again. The thin, lanky Pál Krizsnóczy, the last offspring of the ancient village squires, sitting in his emblazoned special pew and ogling the village maidens, who stood around the left side of the altar, for only the married-woman's bonnet entitled the womenfolk to a seat. A posy of mignonette was pinned to their breast, there where the two wings of the big, flower-patterned silk-shawl crossed and coiled rearwards into a knot on the back. Their braids, ending in gaily coloured ribbons, hung down the back of the tightly pleated skirts, sometimes almost to the

ankles. The young squire scrutinized the girls through his gleaming eye-glass, to determine whose father should be privileged to rent land for a half-share this year.

But best of all, I remember our own pew. My grandfather sat in front and sang with such zeal that perspiration dripped from his brow. I sat next to him, of course, keeping my eyes on the aforesaid Piroska Gáll; however, if she happened to turn her magnetic eyes towards us, I instantly cast mine down, although this happened quite often during a particular period... but more of this later on. Mr. József Pornya, bailiff of the farmstead of Rigy, sat on my left; he was there every Sunday in the summer and prayed for rain or for fair weather, according to the momentary needs of agriculture, and he dropped into the collection bag a big shiny coin or a small dull one, sometimes accompanying the latter with peevish grumbles: "Even that is too much this week!" Next in the row after the bailiff came Funtyik, the ninety-year-old miller, in his blue coat; once or twice during the service he had such fits of coughing that the vicar was obliged to stop his sermon till the old man's paroxysm ended... Prakovszky, the deaf blacksmith, sat close to the wall, singing the hymns with evident piety in a beautiful baritone; but since he could not hear the organ or the singing of the others, he was either ahead or behind, thus ruining the harmony and often drawing smiles from the entire congregation.

This greatly annoyed the churchwarden, who urged the vicar several times to forbid Prakovszky's singing altogether, but the vicar was not inclined to take such drastic action.

"God made Prakovszky deaf," he explained in his elaborate, clear manner, "but not mute. He might easily have turned him mute too. It would not have cost Him anything. But He did not do it, and that is why I am not going to do it either, for I am only His servant."

"Well, maybe He likes Prakovszky's voice," the churchwarden opined, "for he does have a splendid voice!"

"Quite possible, of course..."

The churchwarden thereafter changed his policy and succeeded at last in arranging that the cantor should adapt his organplaying to Prakovszky's singing.

All this would have left little trace in the history of the congregation, or, for that matter, in my own memory, had it not been for a certain extraordinary thing that happened to Prakovszky. I have since thought about it a hundred times without ever being able to find a satisfactory explanation. He was a small, puny man, with a large head and long hands, and he had the unbearable habit of sticking his oar in everywhere, which is why he was scoffingly called "know-it-all Prakovszky." The fact is, he was fond of reading, and knew something about everything, that something usually being wrong.

Somebody, for instance, would mention Miklós Zrínyi. Prakovszky then would break in:

"Too bad he was decapitated on St. George's Square."<sup>8</sup>

Or let us suppose the conversation turned to Napoleon. Prakovszky would chime in with the remark:

"The one who married Saint Helena!"

But this did not lessen his prestige one whit, for in Krizsnócz this was considered knowledge just the same. If someone has a lot of wheat, be its quality never so poor, it is wheat still.

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<sup>8</sup> Prakovszky here confuses Zrínyi with László Hunyadi, elder brother of King Matthias Corvinus.



My grandfather liked Prakovszky; we used to stop at his place (he lived just opposite the church), and grandfather always asked him about the political situation, for a blacksmith's shop then served as a substitute for newspapers.

Travellers coming from afar used to stop at the blacksmith's to have their carriages repaired or horses shod, and all the news they had collected on the way was there exchanged for fresh news left by travellers coming from other parts of the country.

Prakovszky had the knack of figuring out from the various bits of information whether war or peace was to be expected. A traveller, for instance, would relate that the price of oats at his place was such and such. Egad, this meant war; otherwise the price would not be so high! Another traveller would tell him some other time that his son had been discharged from the army, because he happened to have an abscess on his leg. Prakovszky would sigh, for he also had a son in the army; but in the midst of his sighing, he would declare that peace was assured.

*"Quo modo valemus, domine Prakovszky?"* my grandfather used to ask.

*"Valde bene, domine spectabilis."*

*"Quid novum?"*

Then followed the blacksmith's news items, usually received by grandfather with amazement and astonishment, as well as with curses, designed to entice the other to impart still more information.

"You have a demon in you, *domine* Prakovszky. What a clever man you are! How the deuce did you get hold of all this?"

Prakovszky would then shrug his thin shoulders, pulling his large head down between them, and answer in that peculiar, incomprehensible jargon, concocted from legal terminology:

"Well, the reversal of the intrinsic facts of a case can be understood only according to their intentions."

But all this happened much earlier, when he was not quite so deaf; the clang of the sledge hammer later ruined his eardrums to the point where it became unpleasant to talk with him; the only way of conversing with him now was to shout. Prakovszky's deafness also reduced his fame. He no longer could hear the stories of the travellers stopping to have their horses shod, and when he did hear them, he misunderstood them; and the local squirelings ceased to ask what was happening in the world, for if they had done so, he could not have told them anything of interest, despite his attempts to conceal his deafness. To him the voices of his fellow beings seemed to have grown weaker, as if the whole world were whispering, and there was no end to his lamentations:

"Such lungs! What miserable lungs people have these days!"

Sometimes he upbraided those who were talking to each other:

"Why are you keeping things from me? Speak louder!"

Prakovszky held stubbornly to his belief that he was just the same as before, a little hard of hearing. And this very belief made him ridiculous; his own ears being bad, he told the whole world: "Your lungs are weak!" He would not have been ludicrous, had he submitted to his fate. People forgive a weakness more easily if it is admitted by the person concerned - but if it comes to a dispute, the world will always win. For the world is the majority; and Prakovszky was the minority.

And what of that rascal, Bodri? The ungrateful cur, who was nearest to his heart after his son, joined the majority. For some time now he had stopped barking altogether, had become mute. The dog had noticed Prakovszky's deafness. And the heartless old philosopher argued thus: "Why should I bark, if my master does not hear me anyway? Am I to make a fool of myself by growling at a deaf man?" From that time on, Bodri, following his dog-sense, only tugged at Prakovszky's coat, whenever his nose told him there was some stranger around.

As a rule Prakovszky kicked Bodri for his pains: "Down, you villain!" He bore a grudge against the dog, and never again stroked its long, white hair, thus breaking off a friendship of twenty years' standing, because Bodri had noticed his master's deafness. Too much intelligence is harmful, even to a beast!

Prakovszky began to draw back from people as well. It started one Joseph's day at József Gáll's house, when the eloquent Kristóf Halóczy drank a toast to his health too, and said:

"There is another worthy Joseph in our midst, I refer to the Honourable József Prakovszky..."

At this Prakovszky began to wriggle in affected bashfulness. The sly Halóczy, however, only rendered the beginning of his toast in a stentorian tone, after which he dropped his voice and began to abuse Prakovszky without mercy, listing all his deficiencies and washing his dirty linen in public; but Prakovszky answered each sally with a smile, and when the speaker finished with the words: "You are a low-down creature, Prakovszky," and the glasses clinked, the blacksmith, deeply touched, yet maintaining his dignity, trotted up to Halóczy, and clasping both his hands, declared:

"What you said, was beautiful! Oh, how beautiful it was! I shall never forget your kindness!"

There was such a burst of uproarious laughter among the guests - beautiful Piroska too laughed for all she was worth - that even a fool could not mistake the import of that toast.

So Prakovszky, resentfully, turned away from his contemporaries, who were aware of his affliction and made fun of it, and henceforth showed up among them only of a Sunday, when he went to church to join in singing the hymns. He had not been a churchgoer before.

This provided another occasion for scoffing at Prakovszky:

"He turns to God; yet it was He that made him deaf!"

But maybe Prakovszky did not go to church on God's account. It was a rather peculiar flock that gathered there. If an unseen spirit should have thrown out of the congregation all those who went there on account of something else, who knows what the church would have looked like? Why, even the vicar would not have remained, for he went there only for the sake of the congregation.

The widowed Mrs. Buzinkay liked to display her pretty dresses. Piroska Gáll made a show of her alabaster teeth; that was why she sang all the time. Everybody was proud of something and liked to arouse envy in others. Such is life. And every one of them thought himself possessed of qualities which he considered admirable. People are like that. Take old Funtyik, the miller, who had no hair, no teeth and no silk petticoats either! Yes, but he had years! More of them than the others; so he was proud of his years - for he had to be proud of something while he was still alive. To be sure, one is not envious of years, but one does admire them. And that is something. Admiration was the salt of life to Funtyik. He pretended to be ninety-five years of age, although he was only ninety; for he thought to himself: "Let them admire me that much the more!"

And what about Prakovszky? Well, he liked to display his voice, to have his fine baritone admired, and that was why he always sat there by the wall, and why he sang, his heart full of pride over having such a voice. He believed it to be all the more beautiful, since he could not hear it himself. And what happiness for the others to be able to hear it! He thought he could read in their faces and on their lips, how they said to one another:

“This Prakovszky has a divine voice!”

“What a pity he is deaf, the poor man!” they added.

“It’s no pity at all, he would only hear our voices and they are not worth much anyhow; it would be worse, if *we* should become deaf, because then *we* would not hear *his* singing!”

Of course, such dialogues only occurred in his imagination; but never mind, it gave him pleasure.

And that was nothing to what he felt whenever the hussar came home. It was worth observing Prakovszky on such occasions: his eyes sparkled, his bearing was proud, he even put a red carnation in his buttonhole; he walked the streets with his hat at a rakish angle, and his meerschaum pipe was stuck jauntily in his bootleg, if it was not between his teeth.

For Prakovszky was more proud of the hussar than of his own voice. The hussar was his only son, who, when not at home, was stationed in Milan, the city of a hundred towers, with his regiment, and without whom Prakovszky would have been quite alone in the world, quite alone indeed, because he had no other children; indeed, he could not have any more, because when this one had arrived, his life’s companion had left: the noble Zsuzsánna Turtsányi had given birth to the hussar and then died.

But few mothers ever gave birth to a better son, for he was straight as a rod, handsome, and dashing, and how elegant he looked in that splendid, gold braided uniform! He had already risen to the rank of lieutenant, although he was not more than twenty-five; and he would surely be a colonel some day!

Lieutenant Sándor Prakovszky used to spend his holidays at home, in Krizsnócz, every second year. We met him many times. My grandfather kept remarking:

“What a fine son this good-for-nothing blacksmith has! The stork who brought him to that place must have been crazy! Such a handsome, clever, well-built fellow! I would give a little cough in no time if I were a woman.” (In village love affairs an affected cough signifies longing, in flower language.) “And if I were you,” he turned to me, “I would follow his example! A splendid fellow, this lieutenant!”

When Lieutenant Prakovszky was at home, Prakovszky senior thrived; he was invited to name day and birthday celebrations, and even the killing of a goose served to justify an invitation. And when the two of them walked along the main street of Krizsnócz, every window on whose sill geraniums grew would open and it was as if smiling girls’ heads were suddenly emerging out of the geranium blossoms... Sándor’s sword would rattle, the windows would creak as they opened, and the old man’s heart would beat so strongly that he himself could hear it!

On Sundays, the two of them could be seen strolling along to the house of God. The son went a little in front, while the old man lagged slightly behind, on purpose, so as to be able to see him, to delight in the sight of his son. The young gentlemen of the neighbourhood, who loitered about outside in the grass-grown churchyard and reviewed the blushing maidens passing in front of them, would all shake hands with the lieutenant.

“Welcome home, Sándor! How are you, Sándor?”

Soon after, they enter the church. All eyes are turned towards him, the women’s singing dies on their lips, and even the older among them look round; a rustling arises on the side occupied by the women, as if all of them were turning to a new page in their hymn-book, and the news spreads all over the church:

“Young Prakovszky has arrived!”

Ah, young Prakovszky! What a dashing, what a splendid looking fellow! There’s no denying it, hussars are the handsomest of all soldiers! A good thing the cantor does not stop playing the organ in his open-mouthed wonder.

And little old Prakovszky follows his son with short, mincing steps. Short, because he wants to stretch out this triumphant entry. His black, round eyes sweep penetratingly, haughtily over the congregation, as if to say: “Well, show me another boy like him! Although I am deaf, still I have a son like this.”

Look how the old man’s chest swells with pride! He walks with perfect ease now on the echoing stone floor; already he has joined in singing the hymn as his defective ears pick up the first note.

He takes his usual seat in our pew, he would not abandon it for all the world; there is no more room there for the lieutenant, who sits down in the next pew, right behind me...

I am telling this in such detail, because it turned out to be the cause of my great mistake. Piroska Gáll grew absent-minded all of a sudden, and stealthily made signs in my direction. My heart beat excitedly under the new velvet waistcoat I had received for Whitsun. I had believed from the start that this wonderful waistcoat (I attributed similar magic to all my garments) would prove irresistible to Piroska.

And now it had come true! At last, you are mine, my fairy princess, now I have caught you! Her eyes sparkled, and, as she flashed them at me during the sermon, my cheeks grew so hot that grandfather, looking at my flushed face, pressed his large hand to my forehead and inquired:

“You’re running a temperature, my boy, aren’t you?”

## Chapter II OXEN BEFORE CUPID’S CHARIOT

It was stronger than fever and sweeter than honey. All week long I remembered only her eyes, that bewitching look, the burning titillation of those two glowing orbs. I could not think of anything but her. Of course, for everything else in the world sank into nothingness...

A wondrous rustling filled the air. Mysterious voices drifted through the woods, as we drove home through the valley of Uszác.

A different world seemed to have arisen from that of yesterday. Yesterday’s world had slept, numbly, coldly, mutely, and now everything was in effervescent motion; the rye fields were playfully running along with the breeze, whilst the poppies smiled joyously amidst the rippling ears. The brook was babbling gaily. A hundred times had I gone this way already, without ever hearing its voice.

Ah, how long it seemed, that week... The following Sunday came all too slowly. Yet I expected so much from that Sunday, for I was harbouring the most reckless plans; why, I even thought of speaking to Piroska. I saw myself addressing her. "Yes, I shall do it. Come what may! I am not frightened, I'm no pussy-cat. But what am I going to say to her?"

Those were the days indeed! What a nimble fantasy I still possessed! I only had to beckon: Bring Piroska here! and there she stood. Exactly the same as she was in church, with all her movements, with her lips pursed demurely, her seraphic eyes raised towards heaven, her mouth opened in singing, while little lines and indentations appeared on her neck, from which a small golden heart was hanging on a black ribbon. I could see her cotton skirt with the blue dots and the three frills on the hem, under which the tips of her "Everlasting" shoes peeped forth. There was something singular and marvellous about all this. Other girls, too, wore skirts and shoes, but God knows why, it was not the same. Piroska had been dressed by the three graces themselves...

Suddenly I began to like being alone. Everybody was a burden to me. I withdrew into the apiary for hours on end and started to write my first poem. Oh, Lord, that first poem. Do you, reader, still have a warm spot in your heart that will enable you to understand what it means to write one's first poem?

It means the coming of love, the approach of the mightiest potentate in the world.

Love's arrival is not announced by heralds, as if he were a king; nor by a burst of rage, as if he were a seven-headed dragon, with his mace flung ahead of him... he comes quietly, almost stealthily, and the heart is seized with a sacred lunacy, it becomes an overflowing cauldron of boiling, bubbling feelings, and the soul exudes poetry, just as the forest soil after a downpour brings forth an abundance of mushrooms in token of its fertility.

Sunday was far away, however, and a catastrophe intervened. On Friday, my father drove out in the *britzka* to inspect the harvesters, and on the way in traversing a particularly bumpy spot along the road the carriage-shaft broke.

"Confound it," grandpa grumbled, "now we won't be able to drive to Krizsnócz on Sunday."

He said this as simply as if a mere plate had been broken. There was simply no heart in that grandfather of mine!

I was prostrate with grief. I cannot remember ever having experienced anything more tragic. The shaft was broken, so we could not drive to church!

I tried to persuade grandfather to have it mended at the blacksmith's the next day.

"Nonsense, he won't do it, the lazy dog, it will take him a week at least!"

"But after all, grandfather dear, you do have a reputation as a religious man. It would be a pity for you to miss church. Why could we not take a common cart, just like the peasants?"

"I am not the kind of fool that lets his bones be jolted about."

"At the worst it will give you a better appetite! And it will please God much more, if you suffer a little for his sake..."

The old man jumped up angrily:

"I am not crazy. If the Divine Ruler wants me to go to church, then let him not ruin my *britzka*. That's all I have to say."

So we seemed fated to stay at home the next Sunday, and I already had a new painful theme for a poem: "To a broken carriage-shaft."

But Providence is resourceful (that little brat Cupid seems to have no small influence with his more grown-up God-fellow). Towards midday on Saturday, the old farm-hand, Mihály Bozsicska, let our four oxen out into the clover-field.

We were just having lunch, when the peasants coming home from the fields related that our four oxen were heaved.

This caused immediate alarm, for heaving may have serious consequences. No one pays a dearer price for the pleasures of gastronomy than oxen, perhaps that is why they are called oxen. Human beings also have to pay the price, but only later on. For the pleasure man has today, he may suffer pain in the sacral region twenty years later, but the poor oxen have to pay right away.

We jumped up without delay and ran out towards the fields. Grandfather kept swearing like blazes, but moved along slowly, while father ran ahead with a jug of paraffin oil in his hands, and I came after him.

"Stick the dagger into them... the dagger alone will help," grandfather shouted. "This paraffin is a new-fangled thing, and all new-fangled things are worthless..."

But we had hardly reached Márton Pap's hay-field, when we saw Mihály Bozsicska coming sadly towards us, with bent head, driving a lone, brown ox, called Bimbó, before him. But what an awful sight poor Bimbó was! He was puffing and blowing like a grampus, his mouth was foaming, and his two flanks, although they had somewhat subsided, were still heaving like bellows in a smithy.

"What about the other three?" my father shouted anxiously, as we approached.

Bozsicska, unable to speak, only hung his arms, like the boughs of a weeping willow.

"Speak up, will you!" father snarled at him more angrily this time.

At that he began to weep, and the tears ran from his eyes and rolled down over his big moustache.

"The others have perished, master... Only two of us are left, Bimbó and I."

My poor father was much shaken, he scratched his head and heaped scorn on the deceased oxen.

"Confounded, greedy beasts, you! How dared you do such a thing to me! Just when I am short of money! What did you think I am? The owner of a banknote press?"

But being an optimist, he always looked for the silver lining in everything (and he who seeks will find).

"Well, there's Bimbó. Faithful Bimbó has escaped. Behaved like a man. What do you think, Bozsicska, will Bimbó pull through?"

Bozsicska cried like a child, he did not think anything, but kept on saying:

"Strike me dead, Sir, strike me dead!"

"I am not such an ass! Why should I get locked up because of you! What happened, has happened, nobody can undo it. But Bimbó will pull through, won't he, Bozsicska?"

Bozsicska cast a fleeting glance through his tears at Bimbó.

“Yes, Sir, Bimbó will pull through.”

And my dear father was so pleased at these words that he started to pat and scratch Bombó's back and poured a little paraffin oil into his mouth. Then we continued our way to the fields to see the martyrs of appetite. A crowd had gathered there already, the labourers from the nearby fields had all come, and even Gipsy Babaj, the adobe maker, was prowling about with his small brats, rubbing his dirty hands, and continuously scolding his offspring in his funny gipsy dialect:

“Shtop shminking, you shnot-nose. The gents will t'ink we ashked God to do it. And it ish four weeksh shinch I shaid my prayers!”

By now one could not see the slightest trace of sorrow on father's face, and he gave his orders with utter indifference: the hides to be taken to the shoemaker - there would be splendid boots made out of them; the better part of the meat to be retailed at half-price (let somebody call Patyinak, the butcher), and the rest to be given to Babaj. The little gipsies were dancing for joy, and this put father in even better spirits, so that, looking at the large, unbroken fallow land, he remarked, with some humour:

“They would have had to work a lot still!... They were lucky after all. It is better for them, from their own point of view.”

And that was the last word, the funeral oration in memory of Villám, Virág and Rendes.

With that we turned homewards; and when my grandfather's short grey overcoat came in sight from behind the hill, called “The King's Hat” (the old man had toddled only as far as that), father shouted to him almost gaily:

“Bimbó has survived, dad...”

As if our family had no other ambition but that Bimbó should survive.

On the way home they discussed the question of money.

Oxen have to be bought in any case, whatever happens. Bimbó needs to have partners. Fine oxen must be bought to suit Bimbó. But how about money? Get it wherever we can find it. But where to find it?

“Why, József Gáll in Krizsnócz has plenty,” grandfather declared.

“That's true, he has a lot. We ought to ask him for a loan, if he doesn't demand too much interest. Tomorrow is Sunday, you could run over to him, dad. We can borrow the small carriage from the vicar.”

Grandfather nodded his approval, and my heart leaped with joy at the thought of seeing Piroska on the morrow.

### Chapter III THE WATER-MELONS OF THE VICAR'S WIFE

And that is how it happened. The next day, as every Sunday, we occupied our regular places in church. The organ pealed more beautifully than ever, the cantor put his whole soul into it, and Prakovszky's booming voice rose triumphantly towards the huge vault of the white ceiling on which a single eye was depicted. An eye, God himself. Human fantasy had searched everywhere on earth for a suitable conception of God and had been unable to compose out of

rocks, clouds and flames the image of the Lord, the Invisible. So it had seized upon a part of man, the eye, and had said: "Such is God!"

An eye, all-seeing, all-hearing and all-knowing. An eye that smiled gently, reassuringly, when a good man looked at it, but fixed its stare sternly, threateningly on a bad man.

A titanic thought, born probably in a moment of great inspiration. God himself turned to man, and wanting to create a companion for man, he took out one of his ribs and fashioned from it a second human being. So man turned to the same source, took his own eye and created from it God's image...

But now, although grandfather would have taken me for a pagan if he had but known, other eyes held more interest for me: they were not painted on the ceiling, but sparkled under Piroska's beautiful white forehead; eyes that now looked dreamily, wearily, like the setting stars, now lively, exuberantly, like a blazing pastoral bonfire.

And, trembling in blissful joy, I felt her gaze feasting on me and penetrating into my very marrow.

My heart beat wildly, and I would have liked to accompany the words of the hymn: "A mighty fortress is our God!" with the cry:

"She loves, she loves me, sure as fate!"

My whole face turned crimson, I bent my head down, and for the life of me would not have dared to look her way, for I was sure our looks would meet, and God only knew what would have happened then. Maybe the church would have burst into flame! I raised my hymn-book before my eyes, like a nearsighted person, engrossed in singing, and furtively from under the book I looked at her cherry-blossom face, the charming transition from forehead to cheek, the wonderful chin that rounded off the whole, with a dimple in the middle, as if it were the deserted bed of a Lilliputian fairy brook. She did not seem to notice my being hidden behind that silly big hymn-book, but kept on smiling at me. The wily little imp! She knew, she appreciated, that the psalm-book was meant for tactics only, and that I could see all her movements in spite of it.

I was seized with a communicative urge; unhappy love is silent, reticent, but requited love wishes to burst forth, to boast. I could not bear silence any more than one can bear thirst; I had to talk about her at all costs.

"Grandfather, you know everybody here, don't you?"

"Everybody, my boy."

"That woman in the black silk-dress is Mrs. Gáll, isn't she?"

"No, that is Mrs. Krúdy. Mrs. Gáll is the other one, in the grey dress, in the other pew, with a braided bonnet on her head."

"And who is sitting beside her?" My voice was subdued, trembling, as if I were about to commit a crime.

"That is her daughter Piroska."

"A pretty girl," I said, with pretended indifference.

"She is a fine girl all right," replied the old man, "but her dowry is not too bad either."

"Are they rich?"



“Her father has squeezed plenty out of the peasants. He ought to have been hanged long ago. It would have saved me from going to him now, for one.”

Oh, how awful that would be, I thought. In that case, Piroška would now be a hanged man’s daughter!

“Are you going to see them, grandfather?” I queried timidly.

“Yes, but stop chattering so much.”

“Will you take me with you?”

“If you want to come.”

“I want to, grandfather.”

“Oho, so that’s it, you little scamp, you already have a crush on that girl.”

I felt greatly pleased, I liked to be suspected at least of being interested in her. It made the whole thing look less mad, gave it an air of possibility.

“Why, no, grandfather,” I stammered. “How can you even think such a thing?”

“There, there! All right, all right... Stay with Cornelius Nepos for the present, there is time enough yet for Ovidius Naso. It’s true, I got my start during college already, but of course it’s also true that...”

“What, grandfather?”

“That members of the fair sex used to be more beautiful in my time.”

“You don’t mean it, grandfather! More beautiful even than Piroška Gáll?”

“Now, you rascal, you have given yourself away! But the vicar is looking our way already - psst! Stop talking!”

The vicar was in the middle of his sermon, using that peculiar Slovak dialect that is the specialty of Lutheran ministers - a clumsy mixture of all the Slav languages, called “God’s language” among churchmen. And this may well have been the case, because God probably understood it, while the Slovak congregation did not. I wouldn’t be too sure that the clergymen themselves did.

I continued, of course, to look at Piroška, through my fingers, during the entire sermon; she seemed to be fingering her prayer-book absent-mindedly, suddenly taking out from between its pages a square white piece of paper (I could see from afar that there was something written on it). She perused it, and while she did so, her face turned sad just like that of a Madonna. She blew on the paper, as if she wanted to make it fly away, then rustled it between her fingers, and at last folded it as one folds a letter, cowering her head guiltily, like a repentant Magdalena; finally she put the note into her pocket.

When the sermon came to an end, and the organ was played again, the lovely, slender young ladies closed their prayer-books, put on their gloves, while their mothers smoothed their crumpled skirts, and then started towards the exit with a somewhat haughty, yet modest bearing, like so many does. The sweet pit-a-pat of their little shoes on the flag-stones accompanied the cantor’s singing; for when the congregation was breaking up, only the cantor continued to strain his voice, along with a few weak-chested old women, who were anxious thus to expiate the sins of their youth.

Piroska also ambled along behind her mother, between the pews, and suddenly she turned her head towards me and a green flame seemed to flash from her glance, like a will-o'-the-wisp, beckoning to the wanderer: Follow me!

At this I went mad, and not waiting for grandfather to close his prayer-book, pocket his spectacles and take a pinch of snuff, and then to move out of the pew, after politely letting the others precede him, I flung myself across the pew and followed in Piroska's wake.

"Here, here! What are you up to now?" grandpa muttered after me. "The boy has gone crazy!"

But I took no heed. A secret feeling, an unaccountable instinct whispered to me that Piroska's last glance meant: "Follow me, young man, you are forever the chosen of my heart!" (After all, that's the way it is in novels!)

Thus I followed after her, as a blind fly follows the light, and I inhaled the scent spread by her hair. She only turned back once, but seemed to look further back, over my head: she did not even seem to notice me. How cunning, of her, how very cunning!

There was a rush and scramble as usual, everybody wanted to get out, so that there was something of an obstruction at the door. The peasants were vociferously discussing the sermon.

"I seem to have heard today's sermon before."

"Well, the vicar is too old to learn anything new!"

"But not old enough to forget the old things as well!"

The churchgoers had to stop once or twice because of the crush, so the rest caught up with them. The deaf Prakovszky kept pushing the peasants about angrily:

"Why the dickens don't you get going? Don't you have any manners? Can't you see, who is coming? An officer of the king's army! Make way, make way for my son, the lieutenant!"

And amid the scramble, the silver button of his snuff-coloured coat got caught in the fringe of a woman's shawl, but it was not the fringe that gave way, as he started to tug at it, but the button, which fell to the floor, ringing loudly on the flag-stones.

"Mr. Prakovszky, your button has come off," hooted József Pornya, the bailiff of Rigy, in his ears.

Never mind, nobody could stoop now to get it, so he only shouted, casually:

"Well, more was lost at the Orosháza smithy."

(What he really meant to say was: "On the battlefield of Mohács," the text of the popular song had gotten mixed up in his mind with this historical event.)

Outside the church, the people scattered in all four directions. The Gálls' attractive house with its ivy-covered verandah stood on the other side of the Neszte, the brook that cut Krizsnócz in half as the Danube separates Pest from Buda. The only plank, at the other end of the village, involved a long detour, and although the Neszte was small, the ladies could not cross it without getting their shoes muddy and without lifting up their skirts a wee bit at least; and inasmuch as the sight of ankles, prompting sinful thoughts, might have imperilled the souls of the wicked menfolk, who had just been purged of all earthly sins in the house of God, the noble families living on the other side of the Neszte were on Sundays permitted to pass directly through the vicar's garden, which, stretching as it did to the further side, had a handsomely painted little bridge across the brook.

Now too the noble families went this way, and the Gálls among them. I trailed everywhere after them, watching from afar the right moment to address my love-sick dove and to join her. For I was convinced she had some plan for me and that something was bound to happen. Perhaps her mother would go the other way, and being left alone, she would beckon to me. I also hoped that some veiled old woman, with emaciated face and long nose, would suddenly sidle up to me and whisper from behind her bony hand: "You are the luckiest creature on earth, sir, Donna Piroška sends word to you..." (What an idiot I am! This is not Sevilla, we live in Krizsnócz!)

The women were passing between the black-currant and gooseberry bushes, their tongues wagging boisterously. The general chatter was interrupted ever so often by peals of laughter (they were no doubt ridiculing someone) and their conversation converged into a great hubbub that sounded from afar like bedlam: "Red doublet, blue doublet, yellow doublet!" They stopped now and then beside a flower bed or fruit tree, for the vicar was a well-known pomologist and his pears were renowned far and wide. Some of the ladies tried to knock off one or two with their parasols. Woe, if the vicar had happened to see it, he would have made a bigger row over his pear than was made once in paradise over the apple.

At one point, they turned aside a little, to admire the melons of the vicar's wife - those exquisite musk melons! This inspection was essential, for the good lady would certainly ask anyone she met afterwards:

"My dear, did you see my melons? Haven't they developed splendidly? George is positively huge. But Júlia too will be delicious. And as for Marge! But to tell the truth, I think wrinkled Susan is the most promising of all; she is already turning yellow, and what an aroma she has!"

The vicar's wife was childless, and she had given her melons the names of children, pinning each name on the melon's back with a knitting needle: she knew every one of them; she took care and talked of them, as if they were her children - and just as Saturn had eaten his own offspring, she too would eat them in the end, smacking her lips and saying:

"Kate's flesh has a wonderful taste."

While the ladies were looking at the melons, Piroška wandered away from them to the other side of the melon bed, bending down, as if she wanted to examine a little flower more closely or to pick an insect from the golden bell of a melon blossom. Heavens! What a silly girl, a wasp may sting her! She bent down quite low and, with her back towards her mother and the ladies, very cautiously took out of her pocket the square little piece of white paper I had seen in the church and slipped it into the golden bell.

After casting a furtive look about her to make sure that nobody was watching, she quickly rose, and the beautiful arch of her back was again as straight and graceful as the stem of a lily.

I had seen everything, I knew everything. She had written a letter... she had written a letter...! So, I had guessed correctly! If only I don't go crazy with joy! I pressed my hand to my heart, so that the people following me should not hear its loud throbbing. Never before had the sun shone so brightly. It was as if it had melted altogether and the resulting fluid were dripping onto the trees and the grass. The clouds wandered gently, peacefully over the mountains, like enormous gossamer veils, and one's fantasy could imagine them enveloping exquisite feminine figures. The birds sang glorious songs on the vicar's trees; perhaps even the pears were singing. And the meshy golden bell of the melon flower was ringing, clanging, pealing with laughter, as if there were no brighter music in all nature.

But there was nothing unearthly about the bell, no fairy had cast a spell upon it, all it held was the letter.

I waited impatiently for the women to go away. Awful, how long they loitered! Had they nothing to do at home? At last they started back towards the middle path leading to the bridge.

Now I pounced upon my prey, and with a single leap I reached the melon flower.

Piroska looked back from the end of the garden and her beautiful face, flashing through the foliage, seemed to be terror-struck. But perhaps it was just my fancy.

Quickly I took the white paper out of the flower; the fine script was visible through it like spider's legs.

At last! I was about to open it, all a-tremble, when I felt a heavy hand on my neck. And at the same moment an imperious voice commanded:

"Give me that paper at once!"

As if overtaken by an avenging fate, I felt like collapsing and surrendering then and there. But instinctively, I turned round first, to see what that fate looked like.

Alas, it had taken on the guise of a lieutenant. Before me stood none other than Sándor Prakovszky.

"How dare you take something that was not meant for you?" he snapped at me.

"What did you say?" I replied in confusion. "For whom was it meant then?"

The lieutenant burst out laughing and said in a contemptuous, nonchalant tone:

"Go to the devil and rob birds of their eggs and not people of their letters."

That made me really angry, I grew red as a boiled lobster.

"This is my letter."

"Will you give it to me at once?"

All this time he did not let go of my neck, but kept on tightening his grip.

"I won't give it," I fumed. "I would sooner die than give it up!"

"You won't, will you, you good-for-nothing brat!" the lieutenant hissed and, letting go of my neck, he tried to grab my right hand, in which I held the crumpled little note as firmly as I could, to keep him from getting it. With my left hand, I snatched my penknife out of my pocket and tried to open it with my teeth.

"I'll kill you, lieutenant!" I fumed.

He noticed the knife, wrenched it out of my hand and threw it into a bed of parsley. Never again was I to find that beautiful penknife with the horn handle.

Then he opened my right palm - he had a hand of iron. I kicked, scratched, bit, but all in vain, he grabbed the little note, tweaked my ears soundly (even now, in my old age, my blood boils, when I recall that scene), and then hit me in the back with such force that I rolled among the melons, like a ball.

Ah me, if the earth, if the bed of melons would but have opened up and swallowed me for good! What was I to do in the world after that? Nothing.

But what about vengeance? Yes, vengeance I could take! I felt new blood surging in my veins, and, jumping to my feet, like Miklós Toldi once upon a time, I tore up a pear tree by the roots - it was a seedling about three inches long - and ran after him, to strike him dead with it.

Like a madman, I raced back through the garden, towards the church, in the direction in which the lieutenant had gone with my letter. How awful, how dreadful! Surely it had never happened before that someone had been robbed of his letter like that. And how he had treated me! With what contempt, with what scorn, just as if I were a grammar-school boy. I gnashed my teeth, and dashed on and on.

I was in the act of tearing through the garden door, when I ran into my grandfather, and nearly knocked the poor old man over.

“Here, here! Where are you running, *amice*? What the devil has got into you? Have you gone crazy? Your clothes are all muddy. Where have you been wallowing, you little urchin?”

“I am not an urchin,” I gasped, trembling with fury, “I won’t let you use such words.”

“What? You are not an urchin? You won’t let me? Me?” He threw up his hands in astonishment. “Good God, the boy has really gone mad, and now he believes he is the deputy sheriff. Whom are you after, good sir?”

His ironical voice brought me to my senses; I began to understand how ridiculous I looked in grandfather’s eyes.

“Nobody, grandfather.”

I became terribly frightened even at the thought of somebody’s finding out the story of the letter.

“You are as excited as if you had had a fight.”

“I am rather hot.”

“But that stick or seedling in your hand, what is it for?”

“This?” I stammered. “I was weeding in the vicar’s garden.”

“Is that so? Did you run away from church just to weed the vicar’s garden?”

“It’s a passion with me, grandfather.”

“Well, I’m glad to know it; from now on you will weed the garden at home. But listen, son, this is neither a thistle, nor a thorn bush, but a useful seedling...”

“It did not fit into the group.”

The old man shook his head:

“Well, well, this sense of the beautiful is most laudable, but you must not let the vicar see it, or there will be trouble. Throw it quietly over the fence, if you value your hide, and come along. We had better be gone as quickly as possible.”

After all the excitement, a dull torpor pervaded me, I went along without a word, my head bent low, automatically following the old man, like an obedient dog. We passed over the small bridge, around which water lilies nestled. There was almost no water in the brook - just enough for the village swallows to drink and to use in building their nests. The birds of the Virgin Mary flitted like black arrows above the rivulet, twittering gaily.

The old gentleman tried to get the truth out of me on the way.

“Did somebody hurt you?”

“No.”

“Are you worried by something?”

“No.”

“Now, look here, my boy...” And his wrinkled fat face darkened and grew more and more anxious. “You have strayed onto some forbidden ground, for all I know. Something has happened to you, I am sure. You are not yourself. Come on now, tell me at once what happened. Quickly, one, two, three...”

“I have lost my penknife, grandfather.”

My dear old grandfather smiled tenderly under his white moustache, he was glad to have found out what was the matter; it was as if a great load had been taken off his mind.

“Why, now,” he said, quickening his pace, “soon you’ll be telling me, *amice*, that you have lost your silly big head.”

He turned round and tapped me playfully on the head, pretending to be angry, and knitted his brows.

“Devil take me if I ever buy you another penknife.”

With that he quietly slipped his own pearly penknife, with the small saw and rasp and the three steel blades, into my pocket.

#### Chapter IV GÁLL AND FAMILY

The Honourable József Gáll, Esq. was an old egoist, full of gall and malice, whose chief aim was to embitter the life of his family whenever possible. But those who did not belong to his family he strove very amiably to draw into his net so as to be able to fleece them afterwards. He was old already, about grandfather’s age, and long ago they had made merry together during the carnival season at the famous balls in Pásztó. His health, however, was already the worse for wear - he had gout, his sight was poor, and he could go about only on crutches. Sometimes he lifted one of them to strike somebody he happened to be angry with.

He used to shuffle about his house all day long, and often all night too (for even sleep was denied him), wearing a green shade over his eyes, and his thoughts revolving about himself, eternally about himself.

His wife, still quite young compared with him, tried in vain to distract him.

“It is going to rain, Józsi dear,” she would say.

He would not even look up, but replied rudely, in an infinitely bored voice:

“What do I care?”

A little later his wife would repeat:

“It is already raining, Józsi dear.”

“I don’t give a hoot.”

Sometimes Piroska would nestle up to him - as is the wont of daughters - and pass her small soft hands over his bald head.

“There’s no more hair for you to stroke!” he would snarl, shaking his fist threateningly towards heaven.

He did not condescend to honour his family with as much as a glance, but went about grumbling, fretting and fuming, a furious gleam in his eyes, beating the wall, the floor or the furniture or whatever happened to be in the way of his crutches, and croaking dolefully and reproachfully:

“Seventy, I am seventy already.”

As if he were saying to his wife and daughter: “Why don’t you take away the burden of my years, if you love me so much?”

From time to time, his haggard body was convulsed by fits of coughing which nearly choked him and caused his bony face to turn crimson, and the few white hairs on his chin to quiver dolorously.

“The hounds of death are barking,” he would wheeze in the midst of a spasm.

If a guest at his table praised the food, the old man’s fury knew no bounds.

“Me, I have no teeth left,” he spat, throwing a fierce, envious glance at his wife and daughter, as if it was they who had deprived him of his teeth. Nothing under the sun gave him any pleasure. If the crop promised to be bad, there was no end to his lamentations: “We shall starve... We shall starve to death,” he shrilled at his wife. And catching sight of her a few minutes later, he again shouted at her:

“We shall all die of hunger!”

Yet if his labourers reported rich crops, he lamented:

“What good will that do me? The others will have a fine harvest, too.”

When we reached their home, Mrs. Gáll came towards us in the courtyard. She had already taken off her Sunday dress.

“Good day, good day. What are you doing in this out-of-the-way place?”

“I just came along. Is the ‘lad’ at home?”

Mrs. Gáll had probably not often heard anyone refer to her husband by that term. It sounded rather odd in her ears, but afterwards brought forth a smile.

“He is at home, please come in. Why, this is your grandson, isn’t it? My, how he has grown! What’s his name?”

“Ho, why don’t you answer?” asked grandfather, turning to me.

“I’m called Pali.”

“A fine name. Count Zichy’s little son was christened Pali too, and so was the grandchild of the Lord Lieutenant; that’s a good and clever choice, because Peter and Paul’s day comes along in June, when there is plenty of everything, young squash and all manner of vegetables, fattened geese, ducks and piglets, and even the first corn on the cob, but God save you from Joseph’s day, when there is still nothing to be had, nothing at all, just to think about it, my dears, almost drives me crazy.”

Little by little Mrs. Gáll had adapted herself to her aged husband, and by now she judged even the Christian names according to her personal convenience.

“Is the ‘lad’ alone?”

“No, there is a young man here from Moravia, who is negotiating with him about the fields in Lucsivna. But, please, step in.”

“About the fields in Lucsivna?” My grandfather was taken aback. “Why, is there anyone in the world fool enough to buy them?”

Mrs. Gáll meanwhile pulled aside the white sheet that was hanging like a curtain over the door, to stop the flies from getting into the room; then she opened the door and pushed us into the room.

There the ‘lad,’ his crutches deposited cross-wise in front of him, sat at the table on which he chalked lengthy calculations. A stranger with thin, fair hair and moustache, and dressed like a gentleman, was sitting opposite him; he was handsome, much too handsome indeed; mugs like his often appear on the pictures pasted on honeycake hearts.

“Hallo, Józsi!” grandad cried, and his voice seemed to fill the dreary room with gay sunshine. “You remember me, don’t you, you old rascal?”

Old Gáll put the chalk down on the table and pushed the green shade further back on his forehead.

“I can’t see a thing,” he whined peevishly.

Of course, he had recognized my grandfather, and now he groaned, his lips trembling with fury:

“So you all are still alive, and even walking without a stick!”

“Well, we get along somehow, thank God!”

“What brings you here?” Gáll asked uneasily.

“I would like to talk to you about a smaller matter, if it does not inconvenience you.”

“Everything inconveniences me,” he replied categorically. “But it is all the same, you might as well kill me outright!”

“I would like to talk it over with you in private.”

“That is not possible,” he burst out angrily. “I am not such a fool as to let this Moravian out of my sight. If I leave him for a second, my enemies will persuade him not to buy my fields in Lucsivna. No, no, I won’t leave this honest man from Moravia alone. He is mine. If you want to, you may talk in front of him, he doesn’t understand a single word of Hungarian anyhow. Now, who is the kid?”

“My grandson.”

“And I have none!” he cried, shaking his fists, and then picked up one of the crutches; poor Mrs. Gáll, fearing he would throw it at her, scampered out of the room.

But Gáll did not throw it at anybody, he just knocked on the table three times with it (a substitute for a bell in this house) and at the third tap the sound of the piano in the next room suddenly ceased, although the melody of “I’d like to go ploughing” was already beginning to unfold on the stubborn keys. But now it stopped and Piroška opened the door, thrusting in her pretty little head.



“What can I do for you, daddy?”

Oh, how sweet the ring, of her voice!

We all looked her way. The Moravian got up and bowed to the young lady.

“Mr. Gáll, will you please introduce me to your daughter?” he asked in German.

The old man threw a contemptuous glance at the buyer of the Lucsivna fields, who dared bother him with such an insignificant matter, and then mumbled reluctantly:

“Anton Dubek, an honest citizen of Brünn.”

Piroska curtsayed gracefully - but on catching sight of me standing there near the sideboard, her oval face turned deathly pale.

“Take along the boy, Piroska, and show him through the garden.”

I grew red in the face, my ears began to ring, and I thought I would not be able to move, but the girl stepped nearer and asked me quietly, without daring to look into my eyes:

“Haven’t you ever been here before?”

“Never,” I answered in a trembling voice.

“You want to see our garden?” she inquired with a superior, patronizing smile, such as ladies are accustomed to put on in dealing with young children.

I merely nodded. I was unable to utter a word, for it depressed me terribly that she should treat me as if I were a little boy.

“Come along,” she said dreamily, quietly, casting her eyes down. “It is not a particularly beautiful garden, but there is a fine skittle-alley in it, and a fish-pond... oh, such a silly fishpond. You shall see.”

I followed her. We went out through the porch, without a word, lost in thought. A strange shyness and bashfulness weighed us down. Piroska tried to appear natural and to hide her anxiety, but it seemed to me she stole excited glances at me whenever she could manage to do so.

“Do you like flowers?” she asked at last.

“No.”

“Not yet?” she added.

It pained me so, this “not yet,” it pained me as much as if she had said: “You are a child still.”

## Chapter V EVE AND THE APPLE

On the meadow, next to the garden, the village children were playing “geese and wolf.” The dialogue between the farmer’s wife and her geese rang out in fresh young voices:

“Come home, my little geese!”

“We can’t come!”

“Why not?”

“There’s a wolf under the bridge!”

“What’s he doing?”

“Washing himself.”

“What does he dry himself with?”

“A golden towel.”

The wolf - Folkusházys’ seven-year-old Gyszi - was standing between the farmer’s wife and her geese, gnashing his teeth and ready to leap; the little geese trembled, huddled up together, and there was real fear on their tiny faces, stained red from eating strawberries; while the farmer’s wife, little Zsófi Krúdy, a wee lady of eight, called and coaxed them to come home, waving her apron at them.

I don’t know what Piroška was up to, maybe she wanted to escape from her confusion, she suddenly ran to Gyszi the wolf, hugged him and encouraged the geese:

“I’ve caught the wolf, come quickly!”

“Let me go, Auntie Piroška, or I’ll bite you,” the wicked wolf threatened, but Piroška did not let go of him, until all the geese had fled over to their little mistress.

I just stared in astonishment. Well, who is a child now, I or she? And how well even this childishness suits her!

Then she returned to me and became serious again, opening the garden door, and walking despondently by my side as if she had a toothache. There was not much to be seen in this garden; it was like any garden of the village gentry. A well in the middle, a weeping willow beside the well, flowers in front of the apiary, mostly of the kind that was liked by the bees and also suited the members of the household: gilly-flowers and roses for the hair of the young ladies, pinks and rosemaries for the nosegays of the maids, dahlias for the hats of the shepherd and the coachman of a Sunday, in case they did not get a flower from their sweethearts. There was no end of flowers in all the colours of the rainbow; the bower was overgrown with ivy, there were border primroses for the cows, and Saint Paul’s flower grew in a corner, serving as a substitute for tea among the noble folk of Krizsnócz. At another place, a barrel, with a capacity of about seventy gallons, was sunk into the ground; here fish were kept, and so it was called the fish-pond. Far off, at the end of the garden, there was a little patch, hidden amidst the maize and secretly called “Nicotiana” among the household; here Mr. Gáll grew his tobacco. In short, there was nothing remarkable to be seen in this garden, it would not have interested me one whit, even if it had been full of all the magic plants of this earth.

So we strolled along self-consciously in an embarrassed silence, until at last Piroška stopped near an apricot tree, on the top of which some apricots were beginning to redden. She stood on tip-toe, trying in vain to reach them.

And as if she were annoyed with me because of it, she said with some animosity:

“Why are you looking at me so strangely?”

“I?” I stammered, the blood rushing to my head. “No, I was not looking... I’m not in the habit of looking! Not at all!”

“He is not in the habit of looking,” she burst out laughing, and, bending down, picked up a dry twig from the path and began twirling it about aimlessly.

Then she took a few hesitant steps forward, as though she were fighting with herself, whether to mention the painful subject that was apparently occupying and depressing her. My bashful behaviour seemed to encourage her, for she turned round with sudden decision and stepped

quite close to me, so that I could almost feel her breath. She put her hands on my shoulders. My whole body was quivering with bliss, and it was as if I could feel the pulsing of the warm blood in her palms right through my coat, I closed my eyes, and I doubt whether I ever before or later experienced a moment so brimful with happiness.

“You look like a good boy,” she said softly in a cajoling voice, “please, give it back to me!”

“Give back what?” I stammered with a shudder.

“My letter,” she replied, “I saw you take it from the melon-flower in the pastor’s garden. You will give it back to me, won’t you?”

She smiled at me expectantly. I never saw such a smile before! It consisted of dew and sunshine, of query and command.

“Oh, Miss, a dreadful thing has happened... It was taken away from me.”

“Taken away?” she cried in alarm, dropping the twig from her hand. Her lips were trembling, and her face grew white and lifeless. “Taken by whom?”

“By young Prakovszky, the lieutenant.”

“The lieutenant?” she articulated in utter amazement, and the stunned surprise on her face made her look like a silly little girl in her teens. But the colour suddenly returned to her cheeks.

“And you let the lieutenant have it?”

“Yes, because he was stronger, he wrenched it out of my hands, saying it was meant for him.”

Piroska knitted her brows and pursed her lips ironically.

“It was strange of the lieutenant to behave this way... it wasn’t nice of him at all.”

“Wasn’t it meant for him?” I asked eagerly.

“Of course not,” she answered indifferently. “How could you imagine that? Of all things...”

Her words filled me with the courage of a lion; and though I never would have believed myself capable of it, I boldly seized her hand.

“Say it, please, just one little word; oh, do tell me the truth,” I stammered. “Was the letter meant for me?”

She did not reply, but she did not draw her hand back either, only turned her face away.

“You read it yourself, didn’t you,” she said warily, in a subdued voice, as if she wished to evade the question - or perhaps she wanted to sound me out.

“I had no time.”

“You didn’t? So the lieutenant took the letter from you at once? Well, aren’t soldiers awful? But, of course, you didn’t give it up easily, did you?”

“I struggled as long as I could.”

“Good Heavens, it must have been quite a wrestle! Maybe others saw it too?”

“There was nobody in the garden at the time.”

“But surely, you told your grandfather about it?” she asked uneasily.

“I told nobody.”

“That was very decent of you. Please, forget the whole thing, if you really care for me.”

And her eyes sparkled with bewitching coquetry.

“I care for you? Why, I write poems to you every day. Oh, Miss, you have given me back my life. I should have killed myself if the letter had been meant for the lieutenant, and not for me... Please, tell me, it was meant for me, wasn't it?”

I wanted to kneel down on the gravel path, but Piroska, noticing it, shook her finger at me.

“Don't be silly, or I'll be angry and run away. Somebody may look in over the fence and laugh at us.”

“Well, was the letter meant for me?...”

“Why, of course, for whom else could it have been meant?”

“Then I shall go back and take it from the lieutenant, if it costs me my life.”

“No, under no circumstances, that would cause a scandal. Let bygones be bygones; leave it at that. If you went there and made a row, the whole region would know about it soon, and what would become of me?”

I was intoxicated with looking at her exquisite beauty, my brain became dull, and I stammered mechanically:

“True, true. But I have to know what was in that letter.”

“That I wanted to see you, and that you should somehow try to talk to me - that was all, and now it has already happened. Fate has been kind to us.”

“But what next, what of the future?” I urged feverishly, impatiently.

“We must wait and see. Time is on our side. But you must be prudent and discreet, for if you mention a word about all this, about the letter, the lieutenant, our talk here, you will never see me again in this life...”

“Wild horses could not drag anything out of me... Never, never, Piroska.”

Piroska again stretched her hands, gaily, towards the top of the apricot tree and, standing on tip-toe, managed to pluck an apricot from the highest branch... one single apricot...

“I got it. Here it is!”

Her body and soul had become as light as a butterfly.

She bit into the fruit with her little white teeth and pursed her lovely lips. Oh, how delicious!

Now she bit off one half and then gave me the other half with that oblivious, impish intimacy which will warm a man's body through and through.

“Here, this is for you, to keep you from crying.”

The glass from which lovers drink in turns is full of significance, but an apricot means even more, when the girl one loves has eaten half of it and left traces of her teeth on the other half!

Eve must have offered the apple to Adam like this. But Eve did it so that Adam might know all, while Piroska did it so that I should know nothing. Paradise was lost both here and there, as soon as the fruit had been tasted.

But now it was not the archangel Gabriel who appeared with fiery sword, but a grimy little maid who bobbed up in front of us.

“Come in please, Miss.”

I was crushed by this unexpected intrusion, but my heart’s first idol declared gaily:

“We are coming, Panni. Have you laid the table yet?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“And the Moravian gentleman is also lunching here?”

“Yes, Miss.”

Good God! The first doubt was creeping into my heart. How lightly she took her being called away, her being parted from me. And she even had time to inquire about such a trifle as whether the Moravian would be lunching there. To hell with the Moravian, when such a disaster was befalling us!

I would have liked to reproach her for this, but I could not do so because of Panni, with whom she plunged into deep conversation. I never hated any human being as much as I hated this chattering Panni.

Because of her, we reached the room without being able to exchange a single intimate word. Grandfather, it seemed, had finished already and was only waiting for me, holding his hat and stick in his hand.

“Well,” he said, “it is agreed then that I am to come by one of these days.”

Gáll nodded and began rubbing his hands.

“So the poor little oxen were heaved... the poor little oxen.”

A peculiar gaiety spread over his wicked, yellow face.

He was pleased over the misfortune of the oxen - as grandfather told me later on - for one thing, because it meant that another person had grown poorer, and at the same time, because every dead ox would raise the price of the live ones. And his oxen were alive!

He gave grandfather his dried-up, veiny hand in farewell:

“Now, that clover... the fresh clover... It must have had a delicious flavour. Confound it, they must have enjoyed it hugely... What do you think?... Clover melts in their mouths as do dumplings in ours, ha, ha, ha...”

He laughed aloud at his own stupid joke, but his dry, broken guffaw suddenly turned into a gasping, convulsive cough. “Here! Here!” shouted the Moravian gentleman, and ran to the sideboard for a glass of water. Gáll grabbed hold of the table with both his hands.

His head was shaking convulsively, his eyes bulged and became suffused with blood, the veins on his forehead had swollen until they were as thick as sausages, his neck and face first turned red as a brick and then dark violet. Meantime Mrs. Gáll rushed in from the kitchen and started to pat his back, so that little by little his coughing ceased and he was able to sputter, his eyes rolling grimly:

“I am going to die!”

“Fiddlesticks!” grandfather assured him. “But if you do die, I’ll see to it that I am buried here in Krizsnócz, and then we’ll both go to dances again, just like in Pásztó once upon a time.”

A grin spread over Gáll’s face as he, no doubt, recalled the sins of his youth. He was unbearable at all times, but he was even more disgusting when he grinned; his mouth opened

almost to his ears, and one could see the gaps in his teeth, the black, broken stumps sticking here and there out of his gums.

“Stuff and nonsense!” Gáll lisped, hunching himself up like an owl; while a sort of sigh gurgled up from his chest. “The priests lie to us! You will see, János, there is nothing in the Beyond...”

But my good grandfather smiled mischievously, as was his wont when he was joking.

“I would not trust the priests either, Józsi, but the Czech musicians... By Jove, the Czech musicians did not lie!”

Mr. Gáll now struck the table with his palm. A flock of stupid flies, thinking the figures written with chalk were made of powdered sugar, had settled there for a nibble. So even these impudent little creatures have their disappointments? Instead of sweet delights, some of them met a tragic fate. Three or four of them died under Mr. Gáll’s palm...

“Well, now,” said the old man, turning to grandfather, with the dead remains of the flies smeared on his palm, “do you believe these will come to life and fly again?”

Looking, perhaps by way of association, at Mrs. Gáll’s hands, he now discovered something awful. The woman’s hands were greasy.

An awful perspective opened up before him.

“I am done for!” he shouted vehemently, and clutching one of the crutches, he jumped up and struck at his wife.

But Mrs. Gáll, being used to such things, was on the alert, and sprang nimbly and quickly aside, whereupon the angry old man lost his balance and fell to the floor.

“Oh, my coat!” he wailed as he got up... “The wasteful woman... Now, you shall perish, you extravagant, thoughtless woman. A curse on your hands! Oh, the best cloth of Gács! And to think that this woman should do such a thing! I am choking, huh, huh! She brought only four pillow-cases to this house and three sheets... that’s all. She is ruining me, killing me... I’ll die a beggar!”

We tried to flee from the room, in the wake of Mrs. Gáll, who had been subjected to such humiliation. She had been cutting bacon in the kitchen, and when the good soul had heard her husband’s fit of coughing, she had run in, forgetting in her hurry that, if she patted the choking old man on the back as was her custom, the traces of her greasy hands would be left on his coat.

My grandfather was greatly embarrassed by the disgusting scene, and he tactfully tried to lessen its significance. In saying good-bye, outside on the porch, he remarked good-humouredly:

“The lad’s a bit cantankerous, my dear.”

Mrs. Gáll, it seemed, did not find anything unusual in her husband’s behaviour, for she shrugged her shoulders indifferently, saying:

“One should not speak ill of the departed, my dear Sir, but believe me, it was his first wife that spoilt him. I have already improved his character considerably since then.”

I wondered what Gáll would have been like if his character had not been improved - that is, I would have wondered, if Piroška had not been in my thoughts all the time. I was on the watch for a door to open. Surely she would appear from behind this one or that one. It was

inconceivable that she would let me go without exchanging a sweet look at least. I wished grandfather would go on talking, start an anecdote... She was bound to come, she could not possibly fail me.

But she did not appear. The maid carried the soup through the porch into the dining-room. We had to get started, and still she did not come. How, in Heaven's name, could she restrain herself? It was incomprehensible! Perhaps she would watch me from one of the windows, and send her sighs after me...

As we went through the courtyard, each of my steps weighed as heavy as lead, and my glance wandered over all the windows: there was a fuchsia and a cactus in one of them, but her dear little head was nowhere to be seen. Where could she be, in which room? I would have given a kingdom for the power of Aladdin in the "Arabian Nights!" How imperiously I would have commanded the jinn: "Take down the house around her, first the roof, then the walls, so that I may see her once more..." For I had already forgotten what she looked like. I tried to recall her face, her hair, her eyes, but the picture became hopelessly blurred. (Oh, what an empty, good-for-nothing head I have on my shoulders!)

Lord, how sad, how cruel it was to leave like that, without having seen her once more! And when we passed the last picket of the Gálls' garden fence, I felt even sadder, now that the house too was out of sight. But what if she was still there, at the door or behind some tree in the garden, waving farewell with her white shawl? I turned back two or three times. Nothing. Nobody. Only the lowered green shutters stared back at me stupidly, emptily, like giant emerald eyes.

Grandfather snapped:

"What are you looking back for all the time?"

"I seemed to see clouds rising above the horizon behind the Gáll stable."

"Nonsense! There will be no rain this week. Didn't you see the bailiff of Rigy throw a silver coin into the collection bag?"

The sun was swimming in a blinding flood of light in the middle of the clear blue sky. By nightfall, the sun would have lapped up the last drop of water now winding its weary way through the bed of the Neszte, taking cover amid the clematis and bramble-runners, wetting the backs of the pebbles and trickling under the soles of the stones...

Our carriage was waiting for us at the church. By the time we arrived there - it took us a good quarter of an hour - grandfather had told me the result of his mission.

"The old scoundrel did not give any money, but promised to do so next Sunday, if he sold the Lucsivna fields by that time. So everything depends on the Moravian. The old sinner asked for twelve florins interest, may he choke by Sunday - I mean, let him choke, but only the week after. I must say, he is afraid of the other world! And there'll surely be a big bonfire under the cauldron in which he'll boil! What is more, he suspects it himself, I think, for he puts little stock in the Czech musicians!"

"Who are the Czech musicians, grandfather?"

"What? You have not heard the legend of the Czech musicians yet?"

"No."

"Well, it's a good story, especially for this gay village of Krizsnócz. I'll tell it to you as we go along."

We were just leaving behind the last houses of the village, Révész's sheep-fold and the barnyards and approaching the cemetery. The old man got his meerschaum pipe out of his pocket, filled and lit it, and began the story of the Czech musicians.

## Chapter VI THE CZECHS' ADVENTURE IN KRIZSNÓCZ

Three Czech musicians were travelling across this county: stocky Zahrada, Safranyik with his goatee, and long-legged Zajcsek. They had a most unusual adventure. Zsigmond Kézdi Kovács, county counsellor, who was living in the house now occupied by the doctor's widow, questioned them after the incident and took down their statements. These records have been preserved to this day and may be read at the parish hall, where they are kept, like some great treasure, under triple lock.

The wandering musicians had come from the direction of Zólyom, on a peaceful summer evening, and having left the Lopata Woods behind them and descended into the valley, they found themselves enveloped by a thick fog; they said it became so dark, they could hardly recognize the road. They could not have been very far from Krizsnócz, maybe no more than a stone's throw, but they could not know this, for they saw no lit-up windows shining in the night; from this side, where we are driving now, the houses of Krizsnócz are concealed by trees, barns and sheep-folds, and none of the wanderers had ever before set foot in this district. So Zahrada, the oldest of them, said: "My friends, I am dog-tired, perhaps we will reach a village soon, but it is just as likely that we won't; so let us unharness our grey horses and lie down where we are."

Safranyik was of the same opinion:

"Let's do it. The farrier is not going to do any hammering today anyhow." (Safranyik, of course, meant the moon, where one can discern the figure of a hammering farrier.)

So without further ado, the poor devils (maybe just at the very spot we are now passing) jumped across the ditch and unharnessed their greys, that is pulled off their boots. All the boots seemed to be clamouring for food - they were agape with holes. The musicians put their bundles under their heads, laid their fiddles by their side, and stretched themselves out at full length. The meadow had just been mowed. No king ever slept in a more sweetly scented bedroom.

But hardly had they closed their eyes - perhaps they had not yet closed them at all, for how else could they have seen it - when a long row of brightly lit-up windows came into view a couple of hundred feet away.

Safranyik noticed it first:

"Up Zahrada, Zajcsek! Look, some castle or other is shining under our very noses. Come on, Zahrada, Zajcsek, maybe we can get something to eat and drink there."

They were all hungry (not to mention their thirst), so they jumped up straightway, took their fiddles and started off towards the castle.

And sure enough, there was a great castle, with a façade of thirteen illuminated windows shining brightly in the night. And inside, what a gay commotion! Ten or twenty cooks were bustling about in the kitchen. One of them was stirring the sauces, another stewing dumplings, a third peeling potatoes; this one was pounding poppy-seed, that one whipping cream; and the



smell of all the fine courses nearly knocked our musicians off their feet - for, while the fresh scent of grass had been pleasant enough, it was not to be compared with these luscious odours.

And as for the chambers! At tables, loaded with drinks and roasts, sat a host of ladies and gentlemen, dressed in gala costumes. The glasses rang, and boisterous shouting and laughter filled the magnificent marble palace. Count Waldenstein's palace in the golden town of Prague could boast nothing better!

But imagine the delight, the hullabaloo, when they caught sight of the musicians! A red-headed man with a pockmarked face, dressed in a dolman with silver buttons, and wearing spurs on his boots, rose to greet them with a haughty "Hallo lads, you come just in time. Out with your fiddles!"

They did not need to be told twice and began to draw from their strings all the Hungarian tunes they had learned on their way. Young and old jumped up from the tables, graceful brides and lily-like maidens, grey-bearded old men and mustacheless youngsters, and began to dance and to hop to beat the band. New boots stamped and creaked, silk petticoats twirled and rustled, the floor shuddered under the wild thumping of a hundred feet.

A ruddy-cheeked lady of about thirty with old-fashioned curls and wearing a sequin bonnet, trimmed with gold lace, and sky-blue skirt, stepped in front of Zahrada, and setting one arm akimbo and waving her lace handkerchief above her head with the other, danced a fiery *csárdás*, her hips swaying in passionate animation. At times she stamped her little feet on the ground, crying:

"Hey-ho, never say die!"

In her high spirits she once or twice dragged one of the men from the table, and it was a feast for the eyes to watch them whirling around. To Safranyik's great amazement she even got the fat, double-chinned vicar to leave his glass of wine.

"Come along, Reverend, your legs have rested long enough!"

And, believe it or not, the vicar sprang to his feet, declaring, however, that he only knew the "podzabucski," the famous Slovak dance. Now, Zajsek was a past master in this dance, so the fiddles broke into song as if breathing the air of Slovakia, and the venerable gentleman was more and more carried away by the exuberant dance. The long, heavy gold chain around his neck clinked and rattled...

"What a game fellow the vicar is," people whispered. "One wouldn't have suspected down there that he had it in him."

At the sound of the music, the remaining dancers hastened in from the other rooms, and the crowd grew steadily bigger. Some were in light dolmans, others in fur coats (how they stood it in that heat, only the devil could tell), and even seventy-year-old couples were twirling around, with great whoops and bubbling with laughter...

A lovely girl (she was blonde, with a coronet on her head and large gold rings in her pale little ears) suddenly lost one of her heels.

"Who made those shoes?"

"Prakovszky."

"Where is he? Just wait, you bungler! Fetch Prakovszky, straight away! Let him fix it with paste!"

Ten or more of them ran for Prakovszky. They said he was playing cards with the Honourable Péter Krúdy and the notary, somewhere in the fourth room.

Meantime, the baking and cooking continued in the kitchen, and well-dressed roguish peasant girls, wearing red saffian boots and long shawls, fastened to their waist, were unceasingly carrying in food and drinks.

The diners flowed in an endless chain along the vast, long table, running the length of the chamber in which the Czech musicians were playing, and occasionally some inspired brain gave vent to a toast, of which only the stocky Zahrada, who had picked up a little Hungarian on the way here, managed to grasp a few words.

A thin young man, with a wart between his eyes, got up now, raised his glass to the noble and Right Honourable Márton Folkusházy, and praised all his offspring and their descendants. Zahrada said to himself:

“This fellow with the big wart must be an ass, for one should praise a person’s ancestors - it is they who cast light on people in Hungary!”

But the young man went on to sing the praise of his great-grandchildren with brilliant epithets, ending with the words:

“And may God call them to Him as soon as possible!”

The gentleman thus honoured, sitting at the head of the table, nodded in deep emotion, and the whole company clinked glasses with him. At this he rose and, taking the arm of an old lady in a lilac dress and with powdered hair, trotted up to Safranyik in her company and whispered something in his ear. (Safranyik later said, they both smelled dreadfully of mould.)

Thereupon Safranyik motioned his two comrades to stop, and he alone played the bars of a minuet.

The two oldsters began daintily and gracefully to curtsy, scrape with their feet and preen themselves, gliding about slowly as in a dream. All this was both funny and stately at one and the same time. The ostrich plumes on the little old lady’s headdress fluttered, while the thin old gentleman, his hat under his arm, strutted like a sparrow, ready to take flight. Once the old lady let her fan drop from her hand; Zahrada rushed over and picked it up, but the old lady merely smiled and, waving her hand, lisped with her toothless mouth:

“Hold it for a while, please.”

After that, they flitted away, Heaven knows where. Zahrada held on to the fan, but nobody came for it. Now a fiery *csárdás* began. The lady with the sequin, gold-laced bonnet was in such high spirits that she whipped it off and stuck it on lanky Zajcsek’s head, which was so small that the bonnet wobbled about in ludicrous fashion. At this the whole crowd burst out laughing, the revelling became ever noisier, and each tried to outdo the other with countless little pranks.

The dancing was interrupted for a minute, when a fat old gentleman, in a braided coat with cornelian button, declared:

“Here now, where have we left our manners? The musicians have had nothing to eat or to drink.”

You should have seen the bustle which followed! The servant girls in red saffian boots brought in a small table and set what was left of the food on it - roast rabbit, sucking pig, pastry, goblets of fine Krizsnócz *bacca d’oro* and big bottles of Rigy plum brandy.

The musicians hung their violins on the coat-racks fastened to the wall, and then settled down to a hearty feast... How delicious everything tasted! If only the smell had not been so musty! It must have been quite late already, for the candles were almost burnt down, and the draught made them quiver in a ghastly way (there must have been a window open somewhere)... The noble assembly of ladies, damsels and gentlemen chattered and gossiped as they frisked and gamboled hither and thither. The younger ones played "How do you like it?" in one corner of the room, while in another group they threw a white lace kerchief from one to the other, shouting "I am angry with you"; if someone dropped the kerchief, he had to pay a forfeit, and such a big heap of gold rings and ear-clips was finally collected by the leader of the game, that a brisk, hunch-backed little man, who seemed to be some sort of bailiff, remarked wonderingly:

"Our descendants are stupid indeed. They dig gold out of the earth at great cost, and afterwards, at great cost, they bury it again."

Another, clean-shaven, bespectacled little man, taking a pinch from his snuff-box every now and then and stuffing it in his nostrils, went from one to the other, shaking hands with everyone and inquiring in a pleasant voice:

"How do you feel here?"

"Very well, doctor. Splendidly, doctor."

The little man in spectacles rubbed his hands, saying:

"You have me to thank for it." And each time, he proudly thumped his hollow chest.

Everything was so beautiful, so gay... Zahrada could not take his eyes off the slender damsels, and once he poked Safranyik in the ribs, winking mischievously at the same time:

"Which one of these would you choose?"

Safranyik pointed to a roguishly smiling brunette, standing close to the mirror. The impish little lady noticed his hungry glance immediately (perhaps she had heard his words too), and winked back at him in such a way as to make him tremble in every limb, as if chilled to the marrow. Shy Zajcsek fared even more strangely: he tried to pinch the waist of a maid, but something pricked him, something like a sharp bone, causing him to draw in his breath vehemently, after which he behaved quietly, that is, devoted himself to drinking. Zahrada drank plenty too, but Safranyik, the fan of the old lady still in his hands, drank most of all... "Why the devil doesn't the old dame call for it?" The eyes of the musicians were already heavy with sleep... They hardly heard the buzzing and humming; at last everything grew quiet, silence descended and they sank into such a deep sleep that the whole world might have turned upside down for all they cared.

It was morning by the time they woke up, rubbing their eyes... The gold disk of the sun rose above the bald summit of Mount Málnád.

They looked around, to see where they were. And lo, they found themselves in the cemetery of Krizsnócz, their violins hanging on the crosses. A big human skull lay near Safranyik's head, as if it had just fallen off, in place of the gold and sequin bonnet the young woman had stuck on his head. And Zahrada was clutching a shoulder-blade in his fist.

Our three good companions jumped up horror-struck and ran into the village with chattering teeth. There they gave a detailed account of their adventure. In the revellers at the castle, the stunned villagers recognized their long-deceased forbearers. The very costumes were the ones they had been buried in.

All this was most strange and incredible, but the village folk believed it all the more readily, since three such honest men had witnessed it. The three Czechs were lavishly entertained and spent the whole winter in Krizsnócz, staying in turn with almost every family, and shortening the winter evenings by telling the sons and grandchildren about the revelry of their dead ancestors. The tale grew longer and longer. Once it was Zahrada, the next time Safranyik who remembered some new and piquant detail about the noble gentlemen and ladies from the Beyond. Of course, none of their noble descendants wanted to miss a single item; so again the musicians were invited to dinner and took part in a new round of festivities.

Until at last the Reverend Samuel Szirotka, the predecessor of our present vicar, lost his temper and took a hand in the proceeding. He sent for the Czechs, and duly reprimanded them in these words:

“Dearly beloved brethren in Our Lord Jesus Christ!”

“In this village, it is my calling to tell fibs about the Hereafter, and not yours, so mark my words: I advise you to take yourselves hence as fast as your legs will carry you; for if you don’t you will regret it bitterly.”

And at this the Czech musicians speedily made themselves scarce. But they left behind the famous legend; and ever since it has been growing bigger and better of its own accord.

## Chapter VII FIRST DISAPPOINTMENT

I heard the tale of the ball of the dead many times later on. Everybody in the neighbourhood knew the story and had something to say on some of the characters.

The fair young lady who had lost a heel was a Miss Melniky - her shoes had indeed been made by Prakovszky, grandfather of the present blacksmith; the young woman with the sequin bonnet was the wife of Barnabás Krizsnóczy, at the end of the last century (a very gay woman she was, God rest her soul); the old lady with the powdered hair - her maiden name was Baroness Karolina Szepessy - was the wife of a certain Captain Schremmer, Baroness Karolina, and had been lady-in-waiting at the court of Maria Theresa, but after her husband had been killed in the Seven Years’ War, the old baroness had retired to her estate in Rigy and was later buried in the cemetery of Krizsnócz; the little man in spectacles was the district physician, Blatny, and had been just such a suave, prinking fellow in real life, and this was true of all the rest.

I would have liked to know something about Piroška’s ancestors, so I asked from time to time whether any of the Gálls had been present at the ball.

“Who could have been there?” our old cook who was born in Krizsnócz retorted. “Old Gáll buried his father in the oldest and most ragged coat, and did not even allow his boots to be put on, saying there was no need for them anyway in the other world. So, of course, he could not go to the ball, the poor soul, amongst those decently dressed dead.”

The fantastic story certainly made a deep impression on me, I remember it well to this day, although I am already over forty; for me it bathed the simple gentry of Krizsnócz, who had displayed such splendour after their death, in a wonderful, antique light.

All that week I dreamt about how I would rest one day in the cemetery of Krizsnócz, side by side, of course, with Piroška; our dust would mix, and we would see face to face those ladies and gentlemen for whom the Czech musicians had been playing.

But what would happen in the meantime? What about us? I had much to meditate on, recalling Piroska's behaviour in the garden, piecing together again all her words as one is wont to fit together the broken fragments of a pot... There I sat in the apiary of an afternoon, and just as the bees came and went with a soft humming, my hopes and doubts flew off and came back again. Lord, how happy these little bees must be, sipping honey, nothing but honey from the flowers.

I was so restless I could hardly wait for the following Sunday. And I knew I would await each Sunday just as impatiently, until I had made certain of her love. But when would that be, and where could I find certainty? At the altar? How far away that still was! Despair seized me, and I could have wept. Why had I not been born earlier? But at last I was calmed by the thought that she loved me after all. Why should I doubt it? I had not made love to her, I had not pestered her, she herself had begun it. But then I remembered the melon flower and the lieutenant, and again I boiled with rage.

During that week my parents often spoke of the Gálls. A few people from Krizsnócz dropped in to see us, on their way to the weekly market, and gossiped about one thing and another. They talked especially about the things my parents were interested in. I hung on every word that even faintly touched on the affairs of Krizsnócz... Ah, the thousands of insignificant remarks, meaning nothing to other people, these many-coloured, scattered pebbles - what wondrous pictures I could compose of them!

The visitors related that the Moravian had actually bought the fields in Lucsivna for five thousand florins; after he had signed the contract and counted out the money, the wicked Gáll had patted the Moravian's shoulder and said with a malicious smile:

"You are an honest man, Mr. Dubek, but you don't know much about money. You see, I would have sold you these fields in Lucsivna for as little as a thousand florins, because they are good for nothing but buckwheat."

At this the Moravian guffawed loudly and retorted:

"You are a clever man, Mr. Gáll, but you don't know the worth of your fields; you see, I myself would have given a hundred thousand for them, because there is hard coal underneath them, worth a fortune."

We heard more and more about that Dubek. That he would surely open a mine in Lucsivna; that he expected the engineers already next week; that he wanted to buy the splendid mansion of the last of the Krizsnóczys and settle down there... A whole string of sagas were told about old Gáll's fury, how he went raging around, tearing the remnants of his beard and cursing the villain from Brünn who had cheated him.

There were deep furrows on my father's face, when he heard this news. Though a great optimist, he was easily overwhelmed by worry.

"Maybe we won't get the money he promised, if he is so angry."

"Don't worry," grandfather consoled him. "That fellow would even lend out his wife at twelve per cent."

One evening, on entering the dining-room (it was Friday, I think), I heard grandmother telling my mother something about Lieutenant Prakovszky. Grandfather was smoking his pipe, sitting in his armchair, and he seemed to enjoy the stupefaction of the women. He must have brought back some news from town, where he had probably met acquaintances from Krizsnócz in the

beerhall. For he used to go to the nearby town every week, whence he would bring mother a string of figs, a pair of crescents for grandmother, and a lot of tittle-tattle for both of them.

“Well, I declare!” my mother kept repeating, working her knitting needles swiftly. “So it’s that young Lieutenant Prakovszky? Well, I never! But his taste is not bad at all!”

“The girl is pretty enough and a good match,” argued grandmother, “and lieutenants, those wicked bastards, usually know on which side their bread is buttered.”

“Fiddlesticks! They know nothing,” grandfather cut her short. “If I were in his place, hang it, I wouldn’t stay in Milan or in Krizsnócz either. I’d never have left Vienna, and I’d be spending my time unfastening the stays of princesses! I wouldn’t even start with anything less, I wouldn’t...”

Grandmother pushed her glasses onto her forehead and with a testy smile on her face - lovely and pure as winter sunshine - she lifted her fist threateningly at the old gentleman:

“You old rascal, you! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

Grandfather clucked his tongue, evidently to annoy grandmother, and then went out of the room, whistling a tune.

(As for me, I kept wondering to which among the different vocations that of unfastening the stays of princesses might belong? Perhaps to the dressmaking trade?)

“I am astonished at the girl, mamma,” declared my mother now. “Would I ever have dared to do anything like that behind your back? Yet, how gentle, how innocent she looks...”

“That’s the way it usually is, my dear. Even a white lily throws a black shadow.”

“Whom are you speaking of, mother?” I asked in a subdued voice.

“Of course! That’s just the thing for you, isn’t it!” my grandmother fumed mockingly. “What else do you want? Wouldn’t you like to mend these stockings, perhaps? Now, just look at the inquisitive brat! Out with you, at once, go to your grandfather in the barn!...”

I recalled this hazy and incomplete conversation several times before Sunday arrived, and I tried to complete it, to give it a favourable twist, but all the same I was left with an uncomfortable feeling of depression. I had grave misgivings on Sunday, as we drove to Krizsnócz with the promissory note already drawn up, and, having arrived at the church earlier than usual, grandfather said to the coachman:

“Don’t stop here, Miska, but drive straight on to the Gálls!”

We had to make a detour because of the bridge. By the time we stopped in front of their house, Mrs. Gáll and Piroška were on their way to church. They were just passing Zehery’s house under the chestnut trees, and from there they would cut across the meadow.

I recognized them at once, although this was not an easy task, the fashion being what it was. All women looked alike from behind. This was during the reign of the ugly crinoline! No matter, the men of that time loved the women of that time no less than the present-day men love the women of today in their enticingly tailored skirts!

Piroška, moreover, was wearing a new hat, which entirely hid her head and neck; a wide, white straw-hat, with a yellow ribbon trailing from the brim and covered with tiny rose-buds, just like the snail-shells covering the Slovak hats in Liptó. But I recognized her all the same. It could only be Piroška. Her walk, her bearing, all her movements breathed poetry; even the yellow ribbon flitted and danced around her waist in a characteristic rhythm.

“Well, I’ll go in and settle the matter with the old man,” said grandfather. “You may come in, if you wish; but if you don’t, you can go back to church in the carriage, and I’ll go on foot, it will be shorter through the vicar’s garden.”

“You had better go in by yourself, grandfather.”

I let him go in, then I bid the coachman drive back to the church across the bridge, while I went on foot.

It would not have been difficult to catch up with the Gálls, but I did not want to; the mother was there, and I would not dare to join them; but Piroska, if she loved me as much as I loved her, was sure to feel it, that inexplicable, wonderful instinct would tell her that I was there, behind her back, following her like a shadow... and she would turn round, I would greet her, she would blush and... and... But isn’t that enough?

So I followed in their wake; Piroska, however, did not turn back, she only stopped occasionally in the fields, bending down to pick something, a four-leaved clover, perhaps, or a wild flower, then she skipped along gaily like a lambkin, now and then using mazurka steps in her exuberance, until she had again caught up with her mother.

I devoured her with my eyes, especially when the dry twig of a red currant bush got caught on her dove-coloured skirt and the little lady began trailing it after her.

Now surely she would notice this and turn back. I gasped for breath. Something great could come of it! They couldn’t help noticing the twig and stopping to remove it from the skirt, and while they struggled with that, I would reach them; for it would not do for me to stand still while they were thus occupied.

But was it proper, was it permissible for someone to arrive just as the attire of a pretty girl was being set to rights?

I pondered over this, until Piroska, actually discovering that she was dragging something along, gathered up her skirt with her left hand, without even looking back, and removed the mischievous twig. Ah me, how dazzlingly her tiny black boots and her shapely ankles flashed before my eyes...

After that they walked on peacefully along the narrow gravel path, quietly chatting; at the little walnut tree Piroska suddenly turned to the left, towards the vegetable beds. Her mother grumbled:

“Where are you going?”

“I am going to the melons, mamma, to see how much they have grown during the week.”

“You’ll have plenty of time on the way back.”

But Piroska obstinately pushed her way through the clover and the small bushes to the melon bed.

“You are just like a colt,” grumbled Mrs. Gáll. “You are always prancing about, and I don’t even notice when you stay behind or run ahead. Next time, I’ll hang a bell around your neck, so I can always hear where you are.”

Piroska did not mind the nagging, she ran up to that certain melon flower, bent down and (I saw it so clearly, I could readily swear to it) took a folded letter which she slipped, through the opening of her bodice, into her bosom.

I still don't understand how it was I did not die on the spot. Man is a hardy creature, when all is said and done.

I saw all my hopes shattered. Is this how we stand? Well, well, young lady, so you have taken a letter out of the melon blossom? But Miss, I thought it was me you loved, you said so a week ago. Yet I did not write this letter. Somebody else wrote it, and you know it well, Miss, because you were looking for the letter. So you are in love with the lieutenant, are you? And me, you are ready to silence with a little deceit, telling me the letter was meant for me? There, the silly schoolboy will believe anything, let's make a fool of him; he needs a lock on his lips, well, let him have a rose-coloured one. Thank you, young lady, thank you very much. It's all right, everything is all right, I wouldn't have told anyhow, and even now I am not going to tell. What could I say indeed? Why, nothing happened; you did nothing after all, just broke my heart a little.

I looked after her with dimming eyes, as her figure disappeared through the garden gate behind that of her mother. I was seized with infinite bitterness. I lifted my fist, I did not know what for, maybe I wanted to threaten heaven or to strike blindly in the direction of Lieutenant Prakovszky's imaginary figure. I had no idea what I wanted, but I remember uttering indecently:

"Go, go, little harlot, and say your prayers!"

There was anger, envy, pain, resignation, wounded pride, contempt in this sentence. A strange mixture of feelings expressed in a single word. And then I stamped my foot on the grass. "I have buried you for ever."

Buried! If it were as easy to bury the memory of a girl, of one's first girl, as it is to inter a cold human body! This burial lasted longer, very, very much longer...

I stumbled involuntarily up to the notorious melon flower. There it was, laughing at me, swaying in the wind that now swept through the garden, making the tree branches rustle and quiver coldly.

So this was the lovers' letter-box. Two hornets in velvet dolmans were feasting in it. They had flown here in the meantime. Buzzing gaily and rolling about in the yellow pollen, they had no idea of the danger hanging over their inn.

My first thought was to stamp on it, to trample it with my boot heels, but then I thought of something else, and, tearing off a piece of white paper from a letter I had in my pocket, I pricked my finger with a thorn and wrote these words in blood: "Accursed be your love."

I carefully put the note into the bell of the melon blossom. For you are innocent, you small flower bell. I don't want to hurt you. But give them this my letter!

Just then my grandfather appeared, shouting from afar:

"So, here you are, my boy. You couldn't go in without me, could you? What, weeding the garden again, *amice*? Well, we are thoroughly late now! I believe the sermon is in full swing already! Never mind, at least I have settled our business."

"Did you get the money?"

"I did, but the 'lad' wanted to deduct the interest in advance, I all but came to blows with that devil!"



We hurried into the church; the organ was still playing, but we were too late for our seats; Dubek, the new owner of the Lucsivna fields, sat in mine, and there was no more room for anybody else.

So I went back among the peasants, where there was still an empty place, and I almost felt better there in my upset state. Although I decided not to look her way, not to take any notice of her, I saw my wicked fairy just the same.

She did not once look in my direction, she did not even remark that I was in the church at all, she only threw sly glances at the lieutenant... yes, at the lieutenant, who was sitting in his usual place, behind Dubek. Ah yes, of course, how stupid I had been! It was the lieutenant she was always looking at, him she was flirting with! And I had thought she meant me.

Now everything was clear. Mother's talk on Friday; the terror on Piroška's face, when she turned back last Sunday in the garden and saw me instead of the lieutenant taking out her letter; her embarrassment when she was showing me their garden (she was afraid, of course, that I would gossip about it or had done so already); and so, poor thing, she sooner let me believe she loved me... but how affected it all was, I should have noticed it at once. My grandfather must have been right, I was still nothing but a greenhorn.

Thus I alternately tried to justify the most unhappy creature in that church, and while the congregation's singing soared piously heavenwards, bitter reproaches kept bursting from my restless and sinful soul:

"Well, God, let me tell you here, in your own house, that you are not ruling as you should. Why did you strike me down so? Didn't I pass my examinations well? Am I not my parents' obedient son? And have I not always obeyed you too? And you see, you know how much I love her. Why, then, does she have to love someone else?"

## Chapter VIII SYLVAN IDYLL

Such, then, was the story of my first love: a drop of honey in a pail of wormwood, but oh, how sweet, how sweet that drop...

All of us have felt the gentle touch of spring. Others may have been luckier than I, for a thin ray of sunlight was all my share, whereas they, perhaps, enjoyed many a beam, whole sheaves of them... no matter, we prize the first vernal sunshine, because it is not reality as yet, but just a glimmer, a promise, a herald that brings the first good tidings, breathing life into frozen meadows, awakening frozen hearts, and then vanishing like a dream.

Why should we ask for an advance of scorching summer heat at the beginning of spring? Summer will jealously prevent us from returning to spring, but plunge us straight into autumn, and autumn will snarl at us: "Pay your debts!"

Perhaps it is just as well I did not get more - a mere twig poking through the fence around the garden of Eden, without fruit, without even a blossom... no more than a hint of what the trees inside there are like...

Yes, that was all... and my holidays were nearly over anyhow. I did not see the church of Krizsnócz again that year, save from the outside, when I passed it with my mother a few days later on my way back to school.

As we reached the fields of Uszán, a hare crossed the road in front of our carriage. Mother gave a start and began quivering with fear.

“This is a bad omen, my dear, you will flunk this year.”

“Like a flunkey, mamma?”

“Don’t make fun of me. I talk the way my elders did. It’s good enough for the short time I have left to live.”

My mother knew how to make me cry with such remarks, and apparently she enjoyed doing it, for she could kiss away my tears afterwards.

Near the cemetery of Krizsnócz - where the Czechs once had such a good time - the wheeler’s shoe came off.

“A good start alright!” cursed the coachman, jumping down to pick the horseshoe out of the dust.

Mother became even more frightened and began to wonder whether she should not return home with me. No, that would be no good either. Turning back was unlucky in itself, and fate could hardly be appeased in this manner. “And then, what would your poor father say? Let’s go on and trust in God! The blacksmith in Krizsnócz will soon shoe the horse.”

We found Prakovszky outside his smithy, surrounded by two broken-down carriages, a dismantled plough, a few new wheels and a grindstone, which was being turned by his apprentice. The old man was putting a red hot rim onto a wheel.

How amazingly transformed he was. We could hardly recognize the solemn Sunday singer in this hardy labourer; his face was covered with soot, and only the whites of his eyes shone wonderfully out of the blackness; the sleeves of his shirt were turned up, and his arms, too, were grimy from the sparks against which he protected his clothes by a leather apron covering him from neck to toe and from which the fringes of a tobacco pouch peaked out in the region of the chest.

As soon as he recognized my mother, who had stepped down from the carriage, Prakovszky smiled and respectfully threw his mushroomlike black hat on the ground.

“One of our horses has lost a shoe, Mr. Prakovszky.”

“Thank you, quite well,” replied the blacksmith politely.

“Will you please shoe the horse?”

“Ah me, she is dead, long since dead,” he declared sadly, rubbing his hands. “God’s will is law, after all, *homines pisci*, man cannot fight providence with a stick!”

Our coachman, Miska, noticed that the conversation had taken a wrong turn, and in order to cut it short, he thrust the horseshoe into Prakovszky’s hand, shouting into his ear:

“Here, put this on, will you!”

The blacksmith set about it in hot haste. The horse was unharnessed and tied to the block; then Miska held up its front leg, while the shoeing was done; meanwhile Prakovszky rattled on:

“Yes, to be sure, I am all alone, like a hermit. There is the boy, of course, I am well pleased with him, I am proud of him, but he has become very much the gentleman. I was a fool to send him to school. What did I give him an education for? For the king. And did the king ever give me anything? Besides, he isn’t even a king, but only an emperor... It was not worth while,

my dear lady, believe me. One of these days they will make a general out of my boy, and then he will be ashamed of his father. Yet the blacksmith's trade isn't mere bootmaking. I have read in old chronicles that even the Russian czar, Paul the Little, didn't find it beneath his dignity to shoe horses in his spare time."

"Peter the Great, mamma."

"Hush, it's all the same."

"My boy is at home now, but I won't see him again for a long time afterwards. Maybe he won't even be able to come to my funeral. Though I have a feeling I won't last much longer. I am growing weak, losing my strength. I can hardly lift up the big hammer, and I cannot hear the small one. In short, what I need is a small hammer and big voices." He laughed cheerfully at this notion. "My heart grows heavy, when I remember that his time will soon be up and he will be going away once more. I have a premonition he will never see me again. I am tormented by nightmares."

Mother felt sorry for the old smith and shouted at him well-meaningly:

"Don't be afraid, Mr. Prakovszky, he will come back soon, you'll see. They say your son is already pretty well tied here."

The old man's eyes almost popped from their sockets, as if he could not believe what he had heard, and he repeated hesitatingly:

"Tied here?"

Mother put her hand to her mouth in order to make herself better heard:

"Tied to the apron strings of a beautiful girl!"

My blood rushed to my head; Good Heavens, she means *her*. Lord, help me to be strong, so I don't give myself away. Why on earth did that delicate subject have to come up?

The deaf blacksmith put down his hammer in utter amazement; having suddenly been flung out of the circle of his day-to-day thoughts, he began to talk in his ceremonious, stiff manner:

"And who, pray, might she be, that female, in her real being and fundamental essence?"

"Come on, drive the rest of the nails in, master," the coachman said, impatiently.

"Stop your cackling, stupid servant!" Prakovszky thundered at him. "A sharper nail has just been driven into the depths of my heart!"

Mother already regretted having pried into such a delicate matter, but she was bursting with curiosity, she was - God bless and forgive her - a woman.

"They say it is Miss Gáll," she shouted into his ear.

The smith laughed. He thought it a grand joke.

"Well, they hit the bull's eye alright! Why, the whole rumour isn't worth a poppyseed! My son has never even talked to this Miss Gáll. I haven't been on speaking terms with the Gálls now for more than ten years, ever since that scoundrel made a laughing stock of me on his name day. And as for the girl, she has a sinister expression in her eyes. I get the shivers, whenever she looks at me. I love my son, my dear lady, but so help me God, I would split his head in two, if he degraded the crowned starling of the Prakovszkys by marrying into such a coper's family."

(There was, indeed, a starling on the coat-of-arms of the noble Prakovszky family of Prakócz.)

He worked himself into such a rage that he shot darts from his eyes and ground his teeth. The horseshoe resounded from the force of his hammer blows.

“Well, that shoe will never come off. It will stay on even when there is nothing left of the horse but the bones.”

Thereupon he resumed his abuse of Gáll:

“He is not a human being, I assure you, he is worse than a beast, he is more dreadful than that awful giraffe which digs up the graves. He is not just greedy, for if that were all, he would commit his evil deeds for profit: but no, he does them out of passion. He loves wickedness for wickedness’ sake. Some time ago, when he was still healthy, he would stand in the Neszte of an evening. That is what our brook here is called. It is deep enough to hide a man. He would crouch or walk about unseen in the water, and when the herdsman drove the goats home, he would seize one of them as it crossed the brook and milk it into the water. For it did his soul good to think that some poor widow’s children, who had nothing but goat’s milk to live on would go hungry because of him... I can see it in your eyes, you don’t believe me; you think Prakovszky’s gall is boiling over! But may God be my witness, that’s the sort of man he is. Nobody on earth loves him. Even his dog hates him. The dog once stole a ham bone from somebody’s kitchen and carried it off, to eat it in some quiet spot; Gáll happened to see it, snatched the ham from the dog’s mouth, washed it and ate it himself. The poor dog growls and barks at him ever since. What a scoundrel... There, ready.”

In other words, the horse was shod. Mother was about to ask how much we owed him, but the blacksmith, on seeing her opening her mouth, ran into his workshop in confusion, and, to stop mother from following, started hammering away at a red-hot iron, till the sparks flew out through the door, as if a beehive had been set on fire.

“Don’t come in, please, your dress will catch fire,” he shouted.

So we started off without paying. Soon we had left Krizsnócz behind us and were feasting our eyes on the beautiful countryside, dipped in the melancholy light of autumn. In the meadows, the autumn crocus - last flower of the season - had already turned up for the burial of the others. The birch forest, here and there interspersed with beech and chestnut trees, had donned duller colours, and the drooping upper leaves of the ferns were beginning to wither. The grass was fading, the briars had dropped their blossoms, the juniper berries had turned black; all Nature seemed to be undressing before slipping into winter’s white uniform.

After leaving the village, the Neszte here flows straight towards the wood, where it meanders along whimsically, sometimes running ahead, and then returning again, like a nimble little dog; at several places it cuts across the road, a wantonness that has cost the honourable county a tidy sum of money, since a number of bridges had to be thrown over it.

One of these bridges was in bad repair, and some of its boards appeared to have fallen out during the night, or perhaps a band of robbers - supposing such things still existed - had taken them to make a fire with. The notorious Jánosik is said to have dwelt here, the gallant robber of the Highland Slovaks, who stole the goods of the merchants and distributed the broadcloth amongst the poor itinerant scholars. He used an enormous yardstick, reaching from one beech tree to the next one. (*Od buka, do buka.*) And since beech trees are rather rare in the forest of Krizsnócz, the pint of Czinkota<sup>9</sup> was no bigger a pint than his yard a yard.

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<sup>9</sup> Refers to a legend according to which the Cantor of Czinkota, after correctly answering three tricky questions on the part of King Matthias Corvinus, requested that a pint of beer in Czinkota should henceforth be twice the usual pint, a request which the King granted.

But that is beside the point; the fact is, we could not drive across the bridge. Miska scratched his head and finally came to the conclusion that it would be best to drive straight through the forest to where the Neszte was shallowest and its banks not too steep, and there to cross it, while we, if we feared the dangerously bumpy woodland, could go ahead on foot along the forest path.

Mother was terribly afraid of overturning (I myself did not think it was much of a pleasure either), so we meekly set out to walk along the banks of the Neszte in search of a place where we could ford it with the least danger. If only we could have found some living soul to show us the way.

We had not yet gone a hundred steps among the bushes, when a voice rang out in the thicket:

“This way, this way, I am here, Sándor!”

We could clearly understand every word.

“Somebody is speaking,” mother whispered in fright, because she could not imagine woods without robbers. “Let’s go back to the carriage, son!”

“Oh come now, mother!”

It was a lovely voice, a voice so sweet, my heart felt as if it were floating in honey. Far from being afraid of it, I was irresistibly drawn towards it, I felt compelled to search for it.

I pushed through the briars and hazel bushes that filled the space between the great chestnut trees, and after a few steps I found myself at the edge of a clearing. I almost staggered backwards in amazement.

For, sitting in the grass, with a heap of wild flowers in her lap which she was tying into nosegays, was none other than Piroska Gáll. She gave a little scream and turned white as chalk.

“Why, Palika, it’s you!” she said in a dull, sepulchral voice. “What are you doing here?”

I grasped the situation in a flash. Piroska was waiting for the lieutenant; here, in the forest, was their customary trysting place, and the correspondence by way of the melon flower served to fix the time and place of their rendezvous. I was seized by incomprehensible magnanimity. I don’t understand how and why. Maybe, because my mother was nearby. For my heart was full of anger and hate towards the two of them.

“Hush! Not a word, Miss. My mother is here too. I know everything, but I shall not tell her, and it is important that she should not know, because she would spread it all... Farewell, Miss... I am coming, mamma! I am inquiring about the road.”

Piroska looked at me in gratitude, almost moved to tears.

“You are a good boy,” she whispered affectionately (perhaps her heart was not so hard after all), then she picked up a long-stemmed wild carnation from among her flowers, kissed it and held it out to me.

But by now I had the devil in me again.

“I don’t want it,” I said boorishly and left her.

Mother was waiting on the pathway. She asked with whom I had been talking, and said she had been loth to follow me (no wonder, mother was rather portly after all, and the underbrush was so dense, she could not have got through anyhow).

“She says we can cross the stream further on,” I shouted to the coachman, who was advancing cautiously not far from the brook.

“Who was it?” mother repeated.

“A girl gathering mushrooms or flowers, something like that.”

Mother broke into a smile.

“You talk as vaguely as if you had seen a wild beast and could not make out whether it was a giraffe or a hyena. You are worse even than old Prakovszky.”

“I tell you, mother, it was a girl.”

At that moment there was a rustling among the bushes. We looked up and saw the handsome Sándor Prakovszky step out of the wood, a gun on his shoulder and a bouquet of wild strawberries in his hand.

He was surprised to see us there, his attractive masculine face darkened, he seemed uncertain whether to continue towards us, but then greeted mother mutely, cast an ironical glance at me, and hastened at an angle towards the clearing, which the surrounding chestnut trees converted into a veritable chamber, invisible to all save the blue sky above. And the sky neither blabs nor wonders. But mother did wonder.

“A peculiar hunter that, gathering wild strawberries!”

“I never knew, mother, that one could still find strawberries at this time of the year.”

“It is an industrious plant, and when the summer is long, it gets bored and brings forth fresh berries... But he is a splendid fellow, I must say.” And she turned round to look after him.

“Listen,” she added eagerly, poking me in the ribs, as if she had made a great discovery, “I bet the lieutenant is taking those wild strawberries to that ‘something like that.’”

“No, no, mother, of course not.”

I looked at her in alarm and confusion, thinking that perhaps she knew something. She peered at me, and as my face reddened under her scrutinizing, piercing look, she suddenly guessed everything, and cried in her warm, cooing voice:

“Oh, ho, so you are an accomplice! You better admit it was Piroska Gáll you saw there.”

“On, please, no, don’t believe such a thing.”

But mother could read my face, like an open book.

“I’m not to believe it, you say? Well, now I know it for certain, and if you won’t tell me, I shall go back to see for myself.”

She turned round and wanted to go back at all costs.

“I shall die on the spot if I don’t find out!” she declared.

My mother was a true woman and invariably fell sick when she could not get to the bottom of something. A mighty calamity befell the world when Eve ate of the apple and offered a bite to Adam, but just imagine what would have happened, if Adam had eaten the apple and not given any of it to Eve?

“Mamma, mamma, oh do come back, please... It would be awful. The lieutenant’s capable of cutting your head off.”

“So it’s just as I told you, isn’t it?”

“It is, it is, but don’t say a word about it, I implore you.”

At this she returned resolutely and in the best of spirits, for a little scandal (if it happened to other people) always gave her a thrill; she even looked beautiful on such occasions, and it gave her genuine pleasure to be able to reprove society and sigh over the wickedness of the world.

And that is just what she did all the way, especially when she had again settled down comfortably in the carriage, after it had crossed the Neszte and come out on the road once more.

“And now let people say there are no more robbers in the woods these days! Why, was Jánosik the only one? What if somebody robs a girl’s honour? Robs the rose from her cheek, the bloom of her youth, its freshness and lustre...”

She went on fulminating and moralizing like this until the last birch tree of the beautiful Krizsnócz forest had been left behind.

I looked back once more, from the hills of Klatinicza, at the autumnal forest - there in the endless plain, it was no more than a patch, resembling a small brush.

“Oh, the forest, the forest!”

I heaved a deep sigh and thought of the many birds fluttering from branch to branch, the squirrels hopping about, the lizards creeping in the grass, and of Piroska chattering with the lieutenant under the tent of chestnut trees; and of all this nothing, nothing could be seen but that small brush.

How vast the world!

And in it how many beautiful girls besides Piroska!

## Chapter IX MANCZI

A year is a long time, and the student’s year does not leap like a colt, but creeps like a snail. Nothing especially interesting is likely to happen even during such a long time. Unless, indeed, we find the transformation of a boy into a young man an event worth registering. When you were a boy, you carved your own name on the desk, but now your penknife gets accustomed to your sweetheart’s initials. Last year it was your teacher who chose the subject of poetry for you, but now more inspiring subjects present themselves of their own accord, tripping along merrily on the sidewalks of the town, in pretty, pattering shoes and seductively swishing skirts.

Everything comes in its own due time. Just as the breath of spring dissolves the snow, brings the trees into bloom and fills the whole universe with a gentle murmur, an intoxicating fragrance... such is the awakening of slumbering forces and passions. There is almost no succession, but a continuous flow.

Your father tells you to take dancing lessons, your chums teach you to smoke: when you smoke, you think you are a man and you begin to mind the talk of men.

Then politics steals into your heart through some little gap and hides in a small corner.

You begin to have some sort of viewpoint, a green one mostly, but what of it?... There is plenty of time as yet to try the other colours.

Well, that year, my classmates and I too were not inactive. We announced that we were not going to study German. We joined forces, forty of us, and handed the professor of German our resolution:

*“Nix deych!”*

The professors were horrified, held conferences, tried to persuade and overawe us, but to no avail, the classroom remained empty during the German lesson. At last they wrote to our parents.

Around Christmas I received a letter in my grandfather’s round, elderly handwriting:

“My dear grandson, Pali!

“I hear you do not want to learn German. I fully agree with you. Your professor has complained to me, but let me tell you, my lad, you do well not to infect your brains with that language. I shall support you on one condition, namely, that by the end of July (at the time of the examinations) not a single German remains in this country. For once they have all left, we can easily do without the German language, but if, at the end of July, there should chance to be any German inside the country and *in partibus*, and you should nevertheless have avoided the German lessons, verily I say unto you, my pipe-stem will have the last word in this matter. *Dixi.*

“Your loving grandfather, János.

“P. S. I am sending you herewith two silver florins. Make good use of them. Send your old boots home, so we can have them toed.”

The reader will appreciate that I was faced with a rather big task - but I have to admit that I was remiss in carrying it out, for though I stayed away from the German lessons, a number of Germans remained in the country, even after the July examinations, when I returned home again.

Of course the pipe-stem was no more than an empty phrase. I was not afraid of it any longer. Many a year had gone by since it could be used as a bogey! Now, far from frightening me, it hung in my mouth all day long.

Nor had any unusual events taken place at home during my absence. I got used to the changes in one or two days. For these two days were filled with inquiries concerning a thousand minor matters. Who has died since I left? Well, Mr. X and Mrs. Y. And the small spotted calf, has it grown a lot? Oh, yes, it is a heifer already. Is the Moravian still here? Indeed he is, he has started to work his coal-mines, and his business is flourishing; he will be a millionaire soon. And what about old Gáll, is he still alive? If he is, I can imagine how furious he must be. Of course, old Gáll is still alive. And since he did not have a stroke because of the fields in Lucsivna, he’s bound to live for ever! Isn’t his daughter married yet? (I was not afraid to ask now, and I did not even grow red in the face any more.) No, no, she is still a maiden, but there was a rumour lately that the Moravian gentleman has been courting her and that he has honourable intentions. Well, well! (My heart did not even give a start at this news. Where was my heart of yesterday?) But what does Lieutenant Prakovszky say to this? Nothing. What does the bee say, when a hornet flies to the flower it has left? Lieutenants do not complain, as a rule, they only take orders. The lieutenant left last autumn, and this year he did not come home for his holiday, *punctum*. A soldier is just a soldier, his “ménage” is furnished by the king in every town, his quarters by the quartermaster, but the girls he has to get himself. Young Prakovszky can take care of himself, for the Milanese girls are not blind!



In short, everything that had been cooking in the whole neighbourhood during the course of a year was now served up to me at once. But the details no longer affected me, I simply took cognizance of them. In addition, grandfather was ill with the gout, and he had stopped going to church, though he had not stopped his cursing. All through August, we did not go to Krizsnócz once. I was no longer interested in those simple, poorly dressed village girls, after having seen the town girls. Such things were below one's dignity. Innumerable disillusioning anecdotes were circulating about their naïveté. Ridiculous to talk to those little sillies! I preferred to go bowling on Sundays in the nearby Kata-baths. A more attractive entertainment, because it was new. True, the "girls" in this game are made out of wood, the ones on the right no less than the ones on the left, but perhaps it is just as well: you can knock them down, but they can't knock you down in return.

One day, however, my grandfather received a letter by post; after reading it, he burst forth with a string of curses more hair-raising than usual.

Nobody dared to ask him what was in the letter. At last, when he had calmed down, he said to me:

"We are going to Krizsnócz on Sunday, my lad."

At first, I thought he had repented of his horrible cursing and wanted to wash his soul clean with Sunday prayers, but little by little it developed that Mr. József Gáll had written the letter and was reclaiming the capital we had borrowed last year for the oxen.

Grandfather was one of those old-fashioned Hungarians who considered it a defamation of character to be asked to repay a loan (this is the most enduring feature of all the tribes that migrated into this country under Árpád!). And justly so, for undoubtedly it was an insult to disturb the pleasant day-dreaming of a man, quietly smoking his chibouk. It is an inherent right of man to fly into a rage on such an occasion.

Grandfather swore by all that was holy that he would rub the old scoundrel's face in the money as if it were dough.

Unfortunately, this threat was rather academic, for it was just the dough which was lacking.

So we began to consider where to get it.

Should we borrow money on next year's crop and from whom? Or sell something we could most easily do without? But what?

Luckily, grandfather had a famous setter, and even more luckily, there lived in the next village, in Rozmál, a Prussian baron by the name of Knopp, who had been wanting to buy this setter for a considerable sum. So grandfather wrote to him, and Baron Knopp called for the setter the next day. (Now grandfather might well congratulate me for not having driven the Germans out of the country altogether.)

The whole family wept, when Manczi, grandfather's hunting companion and the nanny of my little brothers and sisters, was taken away. For it was Manczi they loved to play with, Manczi who looked after them and amused them when they were bored, Manczi who pulled my brother's tiny cart and patiently allowed my little sister's bonnet to be put on her head. And whenever the children quarrelled amongst each other, Manczi flashed her teeth and snarled at them, causing the frightened warriors to come to terms immediately; in short Manczi, among other things, occupied the post of governess. And now she was leaving our house for good. The last glance she threw at her master was truly heartbreaking. May the Almighty punish that old Gáll!

The following Sunday we took the money along with us. It was a bright, fresh summer morning, after the previous day's rain, and Nature was arrayed in her full splendour, like a woman displaying all her finery. It was a year of plenty; everything, even the poppyseed, was growing, and the stunted trees by the roadside were overburdened with fruit, a boon to the wayside wanderers. The horses trotted gaily on the bumpy road, the coachman cracked his whip to his heart's content, and - hey presto! - we seemed hardly to have started, when we already found ourselves in Krizsnócz.

Everything in the village was clean and solemn, and a patch of road had been swept in front of every house. In some of the yards the older women were plaiting the girls' braids, and the men were smoking their short red clay pipes on the doorsteps. Here and there an old couple was sitting on the threshold; the husband, his head in the old woman's lap, dozed while she rumbled his hair. It was the usual picture and mood of a village Sunday: the fields deserted, as far as the eye could see, the village silent, no axe chopping, no swingle beating, no threshers thumping out their hollow tune, no mangle rattling; and even Prakovszky's hammer was resting.

Prakovszky himself, washed and combed with care, in his Sunday best, but bare-headed, came and went in his small fruit garden, waiting for the third peal of the bells, and passing the time by slaughtering a host of nefarious grubs; rumour had it that he used to drink a raw egg at this time, in order to improve his voice. Catching sight of us, he leant amicably over the fence, saying:

*"Bonum mane precor, domine spectabilis. Whither are you headed?"*

"To Gáll's. How are you, *domine* Prakovszky?" my grandfather bellowed from the carriage.

The old man smiled, then pointed sadly southward into the distance, in the direction of Italy.

"There he is, 'in the king's boot.'"

The rest was drowned in the noise of our carriage wheels, we only gathered that the old man thought grandfather had been inquiring after his son.

## Chapter X MR. DUBEK'S FORTUNE

We could already see the smoking chimney of the Gáll house from afar, and that alone already had the effect of a red rag on my grandfather, who grew more and more testy as he thought of his next task; he no longer returned the greetings at the farther side of the village, and by the time we arrived at Gáll's door, his neck had become livid and his nostrils had begun to quiver. He jumped off the carriage like a young man, for anger lent strength and vigour to his muscles and went along the porch with long strides like a captain of the cuirassiers, kicking a sheep-dog which happened to lie in his way, probably the one Gáll had once robbed of his bone. One of the windows giving onto the porch was open to let in the fresh air, and Gáll was dozing in the room by himself, sitting in the canvas armchair, while the flies freely walked on his wrinkled countenance. (Surely they could have found a better promenade for themselves!)

Grandfather's eagle eye lighted upon the dozing figure. His eyes were closed and his mouth wide open, and saliva was trickling over his chin. Grandfather leaned over the windowsill and shouted at him:

"Hey, Gáll! Wake up, old Gáll!"

The sleeper woke up with a start, and, seizing the crutches that were propped against his chair, rubbed his eyes:

“Who is it, what do you want?”

“It is I,” grandfather shouted drily. “I have brought you your money, you old rogue! But first give me back the paper I signed!”

Gáll’s face expressed utter amazement:

“What? Have you brought it already?” he mumbled ungraciously. He would have preferred to be entreated for a postponement. “Where did you get it?”

“Somewhere. None of your business. Give me the paper!”

“Come in and get it!”

“I won’t. I don’t ever want to be under your roof again. Hand it through the window, and I’ll hand you the money in exchange.”

“Stop acting like a child, János. Don’t make such a fuss,” Gáll pleaded, searching for the right words. “Don’t make a scandal here. My servants are hanging around in the courtyard, they will see this scene and laugh at me, they’ll spread the story. Gentlemen settle such things indoors. Do come in, please! I know you are angry with me, because I asked for the money; but I need it, on my honour, I need it. I am in great trouble... great trouble.”

Now, grandfather was not at all averse to hearing about this great trouble. “What trouble?” he asked.

“My daughter is about to get married. It’s enough to drive me crazy.” His face began to twitch with rage. “What did God give us children for? To rob us of all we have. She says she wants to be happy. What do I get out of her happiness? Do I eat or sleep better if she is happy? Ridiculous! Let her be happy for all I care, but why should I have to buy three sets of furniture, a lot of silver spoons and all sorts of knick-knacks because of it? And I will never see any of it again! Everything I buy will belong to someone else. Whoever first thought up this nonsense must have been stark mad! And will she be happy? What is it to me? Will it help my old apple tree for its apples to be eaten by a stranger, whether he’s a prince or a count, if it decays, withers and loses its leaves just the same.”

Grandfather forgot his own resentment as he listened to this dreary, egotistical mind pouring forth all the filth that was in it. Shuddering involuntarily, he flung at Gáll:

“Why are you marrying her off, then?”

Gáll gasped, his mouth working like a fish on dry land.

“Why? Don’t you know how that villainous Moravian has cheated me with the fields in Lucsivna?” He struck the table with his fist. “It’s a mean trick on God’s part too to hide the fuel from people in the depths of the earth. Awful, awful! I wanted to beat my head against the wall, but it would only have harmed the wall as well as my head. And the mines would still belong to the Moravian. I’d haul him into court, except that I’d lose the suit. So I’ve decided to do it through my daughter. That way I can at least keep hoping that some day I’ll come back into my own.”

“What do you mean?” asked grandfather, a vague expression of disgust spreading over his face.

“He will sign over half the mines to my daughter, and, if he should die first, the other half would be hers too, and then - well, who knows, what may happen yet.”

Just like him to count even on his daughter's death; in which case he would inherit the coal-mines!

Grandfather wanted at all costs to collect the latest news for grandmother, and his anger momentarily gave way to curiosity.

“And is it all settled already?”

“The banns will be put up today for the first time, and we'll celebrate the wedding in three weeks. You see, I did not ask you for my small capital without good reason. But if you take it ill, why, hang it, I'll leave you the money and I'll sooner borrow some myself... Here, come on in and let's discuss it over a glass of plum brandy.”

There was an unusual, nauseating affability in his voice, as if paprika had been scented with perfume. At such times Gáll was most dangerous; but grandfather walked into the trap. He gaily took hold of my coat collar saying:

“Well, let's go in to the lad.”

So in we went. The ‘lad’ shook hands with grandfather in a friendly way, patted me on the back patronizingly, shuffled to the sideboard, poured some brandy into two tiny glasses, then looked alternately and hesitantly at the third glass and at me.

“Pali does not drink,” grandfather hastened to remark.

“Well brought-up... very well brought-up,” declared our host, putting the third glass away quickly.

Then he forced us to sit down, telling us not to rob him of his sleep.<sup>10</sup> As if we wanted to rob him of anything, let alone his sleep!

His was a simple room, such as was usually to be seen in those times in the houses of the county gentry; there was a sideboard, a black leather divan, a low chest of drawers with brass rings, a bed with a scalloped white coverlet; there was a tobacco-cutter under the bed, and above, on the wall, the portrait of József Székács, the Lutheran bishop, faced, on the opposite wall, by the portrait of a warrior in helmet and yellow boots, his sword drawn, with the following caption: *Insignis familiae Gál de Hilib*; beside the bed, there stood an iron chest, constituting both treasury and archives, and decorated with gryphons, while on the top of the cupboard - where towns-people as a rule keep their knick-knacks - lay a sheep-branding iron bearing the intertwined letters G and J, a tin sausage-filler, a small sieve by way of tobacco container, a goose bone serving as weather almanac (for the backbone of a goose, killed on Martin's day, will, by becoming brighter or darker, indicate the weather better than any astronomer), a calabash, several hog bladders, tally sticks, and so forth.

“Hm, yes,” grandfather began absent-mindedly, for his mind was already running on the various possibilities of recovering Manczi, if Gáll should leave the money with him after all, “girls do grow up in time, put on their marriage bonnet, move into another tent, and all that... There's no denying, your daughter is mighty pretty and she'd have deserved - I am going to say it frankly, since it is already on the tip of my tongue - a Hungarian husband.”

“Nonsense, we all come from Adam.”

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<sup>10</sup> “Don't rob me of my sleep” - a Hungarian expression, meaning “What's the hurry?”

“But is this Mr. Dubek at least of noble descent?”

“Why, of course, what do you suppose? He is a Dubek von Zöptau. He would be just as good a Hungarian as most of us, if he knew some Slovak.”<sup>11</sup>

“True enough; and if Piroska loves him, everything is all right.”

“She’ll learn to love him in time,” said Gáll casually and dully, as if bored by this useless talk. Grandfather became indignant at this reply.

“What? It’s only later on that she’ll love him? Oh, you hangman, you!”

“Now, now,” Gáll laughed comfortably, as if he had decided not to take offence at anything today, but rather to be even more pleasant to us. He shouted through the door:

“Panni, come in.”

Panni rushed into the room, holding a woman’s shoe in her hand, which she was brushing with a hare’s pad. It was a shapely little shoe, the well-worn shell of a beautiful, arched foot. None but Piroska could be its owner. It was such a sweet shoe, I would have loved to take it in my hand. The whole room was brightened by its presence among the other objects.

“What do you wish, Sir?”

“Bring us some buns. And hurry up, you lazy cow. You say, you don’t want any? Of course, you do. What was I going to say? What were we talking about? Oh, yes, that she would love Dubek only later on... Certainly. One has to know what girls are like; especially when there is an officer involved... That gold-braided warrior-hero... And, of course, it’s old Gáll who is expected to put up the bail. Yes, indeed!”

Gáll only had three stumps left in his mouth, one below and two above, but in his rage he gnashed them so skilfully that he really looked like a man-eating beast.

“Umph,” grandfather interrupted him, “you mean Lieutenant Prakovszky?”

“Yes, and he had the cheek to propose, the good-for-nothing. A common blacksmith’s brat to marry a Gáll-girl! What a world! What a century!”

“Yet if he loves her...”

“Impudence, I tell you. I sent an answer to his letter which I doubt he’ll want to frame. He must have it by now... I mailed it four days ago. Believe me, that villain of a father of his must have persuaded him to set his cap at my daughter... he wanted to ruin me. I would give a lot, János, to have put this deaf bastard into oats at least once in my lifetime.”

For old Gáll had been a sheriff before forty-eight and had lost his comfortable position because of his far-famed method of having the accused placed without clothes in a tub half full of wine, for which the accused had to pay of course, and having one or two butts of oats poured into the wine till it reached up to his neck; when the alcohol had heated the delinquent’s blood and he began to fidget, he was pricked horribly all over by millions of oat grains - and so simply confessed to anything. Gáll - as may be seen - had a decided administrative talent!

“I see. Was it from Milan that the young man wrote?” asked grandfather, shaking his head.

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<sup>11</sup> Slovakia at that time was a part of Hungary.

“That’s just what he did, the scamp!” answered Gáll with friendly familiarity. “And if it had been only that, but - between you and me - he wrote to the girl too and turned her head. She became quite unmanageable. You know, János, there is something devilish about the uniform of a lieutenant... Those gold braids... She all but refused to write him and tell him it was all off because she loved someone else.”

“But she did write it?”

“Of course.”

“You forced her to do it?”

“I and my only faithful servant, the one hanging on the nail by the door.”

He guffawed derisively, as if he had cracked a good joke.

We both looked toward the door and hanging there saw a whip with a handle made from a chamois’ leg. The blood rushed to my head at the thought that this cripple had beaten her lily-white body with that lash. I would have liked to spring at his throat and choke him then and there.

Grandfather rose automatically and took his wallet out of his side pocket to hand over the money; this was with him an infallible sign of deepest contempt.

Gáll protested for all he was worth:

“What? Don’t you want to keep the money? Put your wallet back, János! Let nobody ever say that old Gáll does not appreciate friendship. He has a lot of whims, but he sticks to his friends... And he won’t call in your capital, he’d sooner borrow himself...”

Grandfather’s pride had been wounded by the recall (he was ashamed of people’s talking about it in the neighbourhood), and he only waited for a single amiable word to put his wallet back again and fasten up the button.

“Well, thank you, lad,” he said, putting his arm on Gáll’s shoulder.

Gáll almost collapsed under the weight of the muscular arm, began to cough, and ejaculated his words as best he could, between fits of coughing.

“The difference-ence... however-ever... you... will pay the... difference-ence... of course...”

He repeated the syllables, because his wife was in the habit of patting him on the back when he coughed, so that the second half of the word would miss a beat. He had grown so used to this in the course of years of coughing that now he talked this way even when nobody was pummeling his back.

“What difference?” asked grandfather in astonishment.

“Why, the excess interest I shall have to pay the Jews. They won’t give me money cheaply, not they. You can’t imagine, János, how the Jews detest me!”

“I don’t need much imagination for that,” grandfather replied sarcastically.

Gáll ignored the biting remark.

“You will pay two per cent more, *punctum*.”

I saw by the look on grandfather’s face, in his eyes, that he was debating within himself whether or not to throw the money into Gáll’s face. But soon he calmed down and confined himself to flinging this retort:

“All right, you old leech. Let’s go, Pali!”

A few days later we learned that Gáll had done the same with all his debtors; he had recalled the capital on the excuse of his daughter’s marriage, and then left the money with them after raising the interest.

Thus was Piroska’s trousseau paid for out of the pockets of the poor debtors.

## Chapter XI THE SHOT

*Re bene gesta* we left for church, but not until grandfather had confirmed on his note of hand the two per cent increase in interest, “pro memoria and because we are mortals,” as Gáll expressed himself, “for no matter how much we may trust each other, who can answer for our progeny?”

He sighed so deeply that the blacksmith’s bellows could hardly have done better, his knees jerked convulsively and his body quaked all over.

“Death is ugly, János... so ugly. And the worst of it is that others go on living.”

We were glad when we could at last leave his room which was poisoned by the breath of his mean soul. The air outside was clean, the sun was shining, and the sky blue, except in the south, where there were red streaks. This was supposed to mean rain - and perhaps it was true, because the swallows were flying low - and the pealing of the bell (it was the third summons) was reverberating solemnly through the valley. The morning was drawing to a close, but on the grass and the leaves drops of dew were still glistening, waiting for the sun to absorb them.

“I am going to drive over to Rozmál in the afternoon,” grandfather said happily, “I shall try to get Manczi back. For I am lost without Manczi.”

“Are we going to drop in to church, grandfather?”

“Of course. Considering we are here already.” Then he added, as if wanting to excuse himself before God: “I mean, we’ll do so anyway. Stop at the church, Miska, will you.”

There were many carriages and *britzkas* around the church, even a few glass coaches. The good Lord seems to love the Lutherans, there are so many rich people among them! But what was in the wind today to bring out such a swarm of people? Had the news already spread that the marriage banns would be read today, and was that why such a crowd had come?

The church was indeed full to overflowing, although we were not the last to arrive: only the first hymn was being sung. They made room for grandfather in his usual pew and I sat down on the very edge of the next row. There was a dreadful crush, and even the passage between the pews was occupied by young peasant girls who had found no room in their old place beside the altar.

In spite of the great crowd, it was cool under the magnificent vaulted ceiling, as if the booming voice of the organ had absorbed all the oppressive odours and violet-hued vapours. Everything was so fresh and cool, nothing could be felt all round but the fine, penetrating fragrance of the bodies of those rosy, healthy girls...

The decorations on the altar too were unusual today, gaudy candles were burning in the candelabras, and the altar was entwined with tea-roses and violets. All round people were

whispering that Dubek had sent them. This was quite contrary to custom in Krizsnócz: the Father and the Son could certainly dispense with it, and Mary was not courted here.

The many flowers were beautiful, none the less, especially the purple and faintly red violets. A bee, which had either been attracted through the broken window by the scent or brought in unawares in the cup of a rose, where it had been dozing in a drunken swoon, a silly little bee was buzzing around the altarpiece, occasionally darting up to the pulpit and then back again.

What if it should sting the vicar? What a rare spectacle that would be! Márton Szicsina, the sexton, kept an anxious eye on it.

Everybody we knew was there, all the lovely village maidens. The four Vér girls, too, one of them with an engagement ring on her finger. My, how the little imp was displaying it, to make the others envious! Vilma Folkusházy whispered something to Mária Krúdy, whereupon the latter reached up to her jet-black fringe of hair in alarm. Horrors, yes, a badly pinned-up braid was coming down... And the hairpin had dropped somewhere under the pews... The two pretty heads bent down to look for it, and for a moment only two round, white necks could be seen with their enchanting lines and charming dimples. Mária's neck was thin as a lizard's, and she had a black velvet ribbon around it which set off its whiteness all the more.

The Gálls were not yet there, but Mr. Dubek was sitting in my former place. His neighbour, however, was not Pornya, the bailiff, but old Funtyik, who was sleeping as usual on his spread-out arms. Funtyik's faded, once ash-grey coat had been turned and dyed dark blue. The saliva drooling from his sleeping mouth onto his coat sleeves mixed with the dye of the cloth, so that by the time he woke up, his white beard looked like a canary dipped in blueing.

Prakovszky too was there, his voice ringing out among the others, like a golden coin amidst dull pennies. He was evidently doing his very best and putting his whole soul into it, and the church rang with the boom. His exertion at times brought big drops of sweat to his forehead, and his Adam's apple jumped up and down in his throat, like a sley cap between the reeds of a loom.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the passage where the girls were standing, and a rustling like the murmur of the sea ran through the church. Beautiful Mrs. Buzinkay, on the other side, took her dainty white finger off the lines of the psalm - she always followed the text with her finger to avoid going astray - and put her lorgnette on her nose.

"The bride-to-be," everybody whispered.

It was as if a fresh breeze had sprung up, a hundred skirts swished, a hundred ribbons fluttered on the plaits, twice that number of cordovan boots creaked, as the girls made room, clustering together right and left, while their starched skirts, flapping against their legs, crackled deliciously and emitted a snake-like hissing.

Piroska had come with her mother. She it was before whom the crowd fell away on both sides, she who was stepping along between the line of village maidens, a white lily among mauve holly-hocks. The psalm, offered to the Lord, was just reaching the words: "Like the deer to cool brooks." Even the psalm seemed intended for her.

But now, oh, how pale, how sad my last year's love! How changed! As if her eyes had grown larger, yet it was only her face which had become thinner. A chill emanated from her. Even her mouth seemed thinner and had lost its colour. I would have liked so very much to believe that this had spoiled her beauty, and I tried hard to reason myself into such a conclusion. But I was merely trying to deceive myself, for well I saw that she was more beautiful than ever.



Everybody stared at her until she reached her place, and afterwards too, many glances rested on her; but she was not embarrassed, she merely raised her head the more haughtily, like a queen admired by the multitude.

Inquisitive eyes first took in everything about her clothes and her diamond pendant that might serve as food for talk at today's tea-parties (some countess, it was said, had left Gáll the bauble as a pledge). Attention, to the extent it was not yet exhausted, then turned upon Dubek, and only as much of it as remained after this was devoted to listening to the sermon.

The worthy vicar spoke at great length, and his sermon was as boring as it was long. But what it was about I could not say, if it cost me my neck. One thing is certain: everybody was impatient, the old women kept clearing their throats and giving little coughs, and the men alternately crossed one leg over the other with growing frequency. The whole Christian congregation sighed in relief when the vicar at last came to the prayer and, after saying "amen," closed his prayer-book, having first removed from it that certain slip of paper through which his scrawl was visible.

All the maidens looked up enviously at the piece of paper. It is the land of promise, that little white paper. The ultimate goal. St. Andrew with his dream, Lucia with her chair, both labour on behalf of this slip of paper.<sup>12</sup>

Amidst breathless silence, the vicar, in a stentorian voice appropriate to the occasion, now read out that the Honourable Antal Dubek von Zöptau was taking for wife the Honourable Piroska Gáll de Hilib, etc.

At this everybody turned once more towards the bride, who no longer held her head so haughtily, but even reddened a little. This too came to an end, and again the church reverberated with organ piping and singing. The world returned to its old groove.

Deaf Prakovszky cleared his throat for the last hymn, and his booming voice stormed mightily out of his lungs, as if to split the ceiling and fight the very heavens; the singing of the others was as nothing compared with his, it was little more than the bleating of sheep beside the roaring wind - when all of a sudden Prakovszky gave a start and his voice collapsed.

It was so weird, it seemed as if the whole church had quaked and sunk to half its size. The cantor got confused in his organ playing. Everybody looked at Prakovszky, as at a clock that had stopped ticking. What could have happened to the old man?

Prakovszky turned round uneasily and asked Pál Szlaby, the butcher, sitting right at his back:

"What was that shot?"

"Shot?" Pál Szlaby repeated. "I don't know anything about, a shot. What kind of a shot are you talking about, friend?"

"I just heard a shot, this very instant."

"Well, I didn't hear any," said Pál Szlaby into his ear, smiling. "Surely, you are imagining things."

"No, of course I'm not! There was a shot just now. Fired from a rifle. You heard it, Uncle Funtyik, didn't you?"

But Uncle Funtyik shook his head in token that he had not heard a sound, although it must have been a cannon-shot at least, if Prakovszky heard it.

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<sup>12</sup> Refers to peasant superstitions relating to the choice of bride or groom.

This only served to increase Prakovszky's agitation and, raising his voice a little, he asked the people sitting in front of him:

"Didn't you gentlemen hear a shot?"

They began to laugh. What a joke! Prakovszky has heard a shot and they haven't. Old Funtyik has been slumbering beside him, and Prakovszky must have been dreaming about a shot in Funtyik's stead.

They waved their hands to indicate that they knew nothing about a shot.

"I heard it clearly through," Prakovszky stammered in confusion, his eyes wide open, "I swear I did, I swear..."

Gáspár Folkusházy, engrossed in the hymn, grumbled in annoyance:

"The vain fool! Wants to make believe he can hear!"

The young furrier from Rozmál, however, turned back kindly, and cupping his hands in front of his mouth, assured him:

"It was just your fancy, godfather, there was no shot. Leave it to us, let us do the hearing, you just go on singing and keep quiet."

But the last thing Prakovszky could do was to keep quiet. His face expressed unusual perturbation; his hands were trembling; he tried to put the hymn-book into its box, but could not manage it, so he left it lying there and stood up in order to squeeze his way out of the pew; he accomplished this with some difficulty because of the fat gentlemen, and he even stepped on the corns of some of them; and as he fought his way out sideways, the silver button of his dolman got caught in Dubek von Zöptau's watch-chain, and he pulled both chain and watch out of the latter's pocket and dragged them along on his coat-button, till they dropped with a big clatter onto the stone floor of the church. Everybody looked in the direction of the noise. What was that? What has happened? What was that clatter? Why is Prakovszky leaving? A whisper arose which soon changed into laughter.

"The poor fellow has heard a shot."

It spread like wildfire. From one neighbour to the other. "Prakovszky has heard a shot." Well, isn't it funny? He is as deaf as a stick, and yet he heard a shot. Impossible not to laugh at that. As if a mischievous sprite had tickled the women and men alike, a broad grin spread over every face. Ha-ha-ha! Prakovszky has heard a shot. We did not bear a thing. All eyes were sparkling gleefully, each forehead grew smooth and bright with good humour.

The sun poured its rays into the church like a golden waterfall, yes, the sunshine itself was laughing, and even Abraham, offering up his son on the altar-piece, seemed unable to withhold a smile.

With dull eyes and wavering steps, Prakovszky himself was meantime vigorously pushing his way out through the bevy of maidens blocking his path in the passage. As he stumbled on, almost beside himself, his terror-struck eyes darting hither and thither, he dully, yet gently asked of acquaintances he passed:

"Didn't you hear the shot, dear girls?"

No, no. Nobody had heard it.

"Strange, strange..."

His face turned more and more yellow, like that of a dead man, like wax. It was indeed strange. For he could not have heard any shot, and even if he had, what of it? Why worry, if someone fires a shot outside? A mischievous boy may have fired a pistol, or a herdsman behind the gardens may have aimed at a flock of partridges whirring out of the grass. Why should anybody get so excited about it?

Prakovszky ran out of the church and inquired among the coachmen. Didn't they hear the shot? They too shook their heads and laughed among each other. No, Sir, there had not even been the cracking of a whip!

Then Prakovszky ran home, bare-headed; he had forgotten his hat in the pew. There in the kitchen he found his apprentice making love to the maid while she was cooking dinner. Prakovszky grabbed him by the collar and yelled at him:

"Who fired a shot just now?"

"I didn't," protested the lad with an innocent mien. "How could you think such a thing?"

Prakovszky let him go and ran out again, rousing the whole neighbourhood with his inquiries. By that time, the congregation had come out of the church, and the furrier of Rozmál, his godson, was bringing him his hat and prayer-book, shouting after him at the top of his voice:

"Godfather, hey, godfather!"

But the old man did not heed him, just kept on asking everybody whether they had not heard anything, and mumbling all the time, with heaving breast and bowed head:

"How peculiar, how strange..."

\*

Even small things are big events in Krizsnóc. The whole village was enjoying the funny story of how Prakovszky had heard a shot.

Grandfather too told it at lunch, and everybody laughed over it.

But the laughter died away, suddenly, when four days later there was news from Milan that Sándor Prakovszky, lieutenant of the Imperial and Royal Hussars, had blown out his brains in the big barracks there on the previous Sunday around midday.

"Poor fellow!" grandfather remarked sadly. "Piroska's letter is to blame for this."

"Poor old Prakovszky," interposed my mother, and her tender, kind eyes filled with tears. "He did hear that shot!"

I too was shaken by the news, but mother's words astonished me no less.

"But that's impossible, mother darling... from such a distance! How can you imagine such a thing?"

Mother put her arms around me and stroked my head, gently, sadly.

"You don't know it yet. But one day you will learn that a parent's heart can see further than the eye and hear better than the ear. You don't know it yet..."

1904

## SÁNDOR BRÓDY

(1863-1924)

Bródy made an early appearance in literature; without even completing his studies, he took employment with a firm of solicitors as articled clerk, in order to have more leisure, and wrote busily for newspapers - and for his desk. Before long, he secured for himself a place in journalism, and was just going on to 20 when he published his first book, with the symbolic title: *Nyomor* (Poverty).

Kálmán Mikszáth hailed him in these words, "Literary circles look upon him as a great talent." Bródy then began a feverish activity. He made himself the one-man staff of the magazine *Fehér Könyv* (The White Book), the most progressive periodical to be printed in the Hungary of the early twentieth century. He published several novels and strings of short stories each year, and his plays had successful runs. His principal novels - *A nap lovagja* (Knight of the Sun), *Az ezüst kecske* (The Silver Goat), *Don Quichotte kisasszony* (Miss Don Quixote), *A villamos* (The Tram), and *Rembrandt* - as well as his plays - *A dada* (The Nurse), *A tanítónő* (The Teacher), and *Lyon Lea* - made him very popular as an author and playwright. The writer's obligation to present the truth remained his artistic programme to his last day. In most of his writings his theme was lower-class morals and poverty, the kind of poverty which was introduced into world literature through Zola's work. Both his outlook and style were strongly influenced by a naturalism tinged with a certain amount of impressionistic humour.

His lifework remained incomplete and is not without flaws. He was not in want of talent - it was self-discipline, perseverance and a coherent philosophy that he lacked. Several of his novels, for instance, have a fozzled ending, yet in each we find several chapters and scenes that are magnificent. On the other hand, masterpieces abound among his short stories in which he writes about the loves and poverty of the underdog or the purposeless existence of the man of wealth.

Bródy had an ill-regulated, hectic tempo of living. He was a celebrated playwright, one of the most widely read authors of his time; a handsome man who was idolized by women; an ace at cards; a militant politician and a columnist whose pen made strong men quail. Yet he never found peace of mind; success and appreciation failed to satisfy him. Several times he broke down, lost his zest for life, and again and again threw himself into the whirling of Budapest life. After the downfall of the Hungarian Republic of Councils of 1919, he went into exile but returned a few years later as though only waiting for death. In his last great work, *Rembrandt*, Bródy wrote of his disappointments.

## THE JEST

On Wednesday, up there at the hilltop, at Fedémes village, a body of Polish lancers turned out in the small hours of the morning and rode forth, ammunition and all, to the training-ground. By the time the morning bell rang, the whole village was ablaze.

The lurid glare could be seen throughout the foothill district, as far as Szépasszonyfalva, or Fair Lady's Thorpe. There, the Matyó<sup>13</sup> men kept crossing themselves tirelessly, while their womenfolk - although it was only mid-week - treated the soldiers to generous dishes of stuffed cabbage, anxious to keep them in the village. The village lads, however, their spirits sagging whenever the soldiers roistered at the inn, sneaked out and trudged home.

The villagers held that discretion was the better part of valour and that, rather than pay the price of insubordination, it was wiser to resign themselves to their fate. Besides, life had been like this ever since the 1870s, and they had grown accustomed to it. The same two companies of the same Hussar regiment had been stationed in their midst, all those long years.

The rank and file - mostly Ruthenians with only about one-fourth from the home country - were relieved by fresh levies every three years, but these changes had no effect on the lives of the villagers.

Throughout the valley the grass grew as fine as silk; yet the peasants' horses were hidebound, listless and bony, for the hussars took away the best, most fragrant hay and fed it to the cavalry horses before the very eyes of the inhabitants. They broke into the barns in broad daylight, and woe to any Matyó who dared protest. Young Kispatkóssy tried it once... On the wooden cross above his grave, there is a fine verse about his young life and grievous end. Perhaps it has worn off by now, but the village folk still remember it.

The pick of everything in cottage and stable was grabbed by those greedy locusts. Even the lads from the home country had quite fallen into their evil habits.

There was no remedy, no person to complain to. The young men in the village, scorned and humbled, went about chanting the most innocent of folk-tunes, as sadly as if it were a dirge:

“Who owns this house here that I see?  
Could it Master János be?  
And that house yonder that I see?  
András would its master be.”

The old women shed many a tear.

But the officers - none of them higher ranking than captain - had picked up a smattering of Hungarian; and their laughter was as unfeeling as the laments of the peasants were bitter.

And what else could one do in that place but laugh and weep?

What a foul hole, that village! The officers were bored to death, finding relief only in an occasional prank. At night, they would serenade all and sundry; the Jew Sam's wife, the Paklincs girls, any women that was handy. So far, they had spared only the doctor's wife, without having any particular reason for this omission.

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<sup>13</sup> Matyó: inhabitants of a part of Borsod County.

That night the officers could get no sleep because of the *autoda-fé* at Fedémes. They did not disperse until shortly before dawn. Baron Brandel - the Lieutenant - would not budge without company, so he took the gipsy musicians and led them straight to the doctor's house.

The band struck up. The Baron sang the serenade to its accompaniment and raised his voice to a furious pitch when the doctor's head appeared in the window.

"Go away!" said the doctor curtly.

"Stay!" the Lieutenant commanded.

The shutters swung to, and a few minutes later the doctor stood facing the soldier.

"*Herr Baron*, may I have a word with you?"

The Lieutenant laughed and waved the gipsies away. Then he placed his hand upon the hilt of his sword and said: "At your service."

Not a soul was near them. It was pitch dark. The doctor spoke up: "*Herr Baron*, you are not acquainted with my family, I presume."

"No."

"To what, then, do we owe this unusual honour?"

"I do as I wish."

A resounding slap shattered the stillness. The officer clapped his hand to his sword. The doctor drew a revolver from his pocket.

"Step closer!"

Brandishing his sword and spitting invective, the officer made four passes at him.

But each time he approached his opponent and saw death staring at him out of the barrel of that small revolver, his arms and lips went dead. He tried to work himself into a frenzy, but without success; and his blood froze when his last charge brought a bullet whizzing past his neck, singeing his whiskers.

Cursing still, but trembling, he staggered to his billet.

He found his Hungarian batman lying as usual at his door. He kicked the man in the hip. Samu Kaál sprang to his feet.

"Sir!"

He was told to fetch wine from the cellar. He lit the lamp and placed the beverage on the table.

"Be off!" said the officer.

Samu Kaál started towards the door.

Moved by a sudden thought, the baron seized his batman's hand. "Stay here," he said gently. He stepped up to the table, poured wine into two glasses and gave one to the soldier. "Have a drink."

Samu Kaál's broad Matyó features now contracted with anxiety, now expanded in elation.

They drank...

At three o'clock in the morning the doctor got into his carriage, to visit his patients. The driver said: "Gee-up!"

Suddenly, behind him, his master tumbled out of the carriage.

A bullet, fired from a hussar carbine, had pierced his heart. Behind the carriage, a hussar was spotted behind some elder-bushes, by vegetable-women going early to market.

“Samu Kaál! What’ve you done?...” they shouted after the hussar, who had thrown away his weapon and was running towards the river bank.

Samu Kaál was taken to brigade headquarters at Miskolc. On the way there, he kept silent between his escorts and smiled to himself.

“The idiots,” he thought, “they think they’re taking me to my death.”

He laughed when they tried to comfort him:

“Don’t worry, Samu, you’re not going to get bumped off for that.”

“Why should I worry?” he answered.

The escorts, itching to know, went on asking: “Whatever made you do it, Samu Kaál?”

But he kept his thin lips tightly pressed, raised his sparse, yellow eyebrows, and said nothing.

Nor could they elicit a word from him in prison. The provost marshal and the examining magistrate - a Major - did their best to make him talk, but they were wasting their time: Samu Kaál maintained a facetious look and snickered slyly, at times even shooting a mischievous glance at the Major as if to say:

“Alright, alright, you and I know better.”

Days and weeks went by. Szépasszonyfalva was not far away, and one day the Lieutenant entered Samu’s cell.

What joy this visit brought him! He wiped his streaming rabbit’s eyes with his fists, and even the old provost marshal was close to crying.

Ah, the *Herr Offizier* was a good soul, bless him!

The ward left officer and batman to themselves. Through the door he overheard the officer saying soothing words to the Matyó lad, and the latter supplicating his master:

“Oh, please, Sir, you won’t let me down, Sir, will you?”

The day after, Samu Kaál declared that he wished to confess.

And he did confess.

“It was on Tuesday... I poked fun at his horse... He struck me with his whip... ‘You’ll die for this,’ I swore...”

Upon this, the investigation was wound up. Sentence followed very soon.

The day before the judgement was pronounced Samu’s mother brought her son clean linen and some food. She was admitted to his cell, so they might cry out their hearts together.

And the old woman’s weeping expressed the grief of a whole village. Her son comforted her with speech so strange, one might think the poor lad was out of his mind.

“That bit o’ land of Ferus Bándi’s that lies next to ours, is it still to be had?” he asked his mother, slipping his hand into the pocket of his vest as if he meant to produce the sum.

He wanted to say a good deal more, and he did drop a few words about his master and that he, Samu, might be back home sooner than the others. Yet it was all so confused that his old mother sank deeper and deeper into despair, as she listened to him.

Samu Kaál was whistling a tune when they brought him before the court. His fresh clothes, clean linen and polished boots, matched his beaming countenance and big jug-ears; he was bright and shining like the cockade on his shako.

He sprang to attention in so soldierly a fashion that the presiding Colonel almost looked gratified.

“That’s the spirit, my man!” the mute look of Samu’s master seemed to say in encouragement. The Lieutenant was a member of the tribunal, his figure, smart as usual, but his cheeks pale as never before.

Samu Kaál was sentenced to death: for treacherously attacking and murdering a man, he was to be hanged by the neck...

Suddenly, the batman’s tanned face became clouded, but it soon brightened again. He saluted smartly, and was led away.

In the army, retribution does not tarry long, nor was it allowed to do so at the brigade jail. Samu was divested of his uniform and his peasant garb returned to him. Oh, how happy he was to get them back! In one of the pockets of his short coat he found two rosemaries. Dry and withered though they had become, still, there they lay where he had stuck them two years ago.

Tears fell from his eyes at last. So he would go home, after all. It was true then, God bless his master!... He seized and fervently kissed the hand of the Lieutenant, who even now deigned to visit his batman.

“Be sensible, man! Keep your wits together and have no fear!” said the officer, and walked out of the condemned cell abandoning the prisoner to his solitude.

Samu Kaál repeated the words to his mother:

“Be sensible, mother! Keep your wits together and have no fear!”

The old woman was already beyond fear. She hardly knew where or who she was and whether to believe in God. Her entire body trembled.

Dawn came, a bright, snow-bound winter dawn. Through the window of his cell Samu Kaál could see the whole prison-yard: it was full of cord wood, only one slender beam by the wall stretched into the air. Some civilians were busily doing something with it.

Samu Kaál stared and stared. “What a devil of a show they’re putting up,” he thought. All the same, he felt a cold shiver running down his spine. He tried to reassure himself. Perhaps he was hungry? He took some food. Then he lit a cigar (his master had sent it in for him). He wasn’t halfway through before they snatched it out of his mouth. More than half of it unsmoked! And how good it had tasted! He was sorry to have to stop smoking it, and placed it on the shelf.

He was told to say his prayers; then he was led out.

There in the yard his company stood arrayed in full uniform. He nodded in their direction and looked at them out of the corner of his eye. He wished he could have said something to hearten them:

“Have no fear, boys!”



He shuddered slightly, but wasn't afraid. Why should he be? Wasn't his master, that strapping man, that all-powerful officer, standing there, at the head of his company? Dressed in his gold fringed uniform and sporting a gleaming medal on his breast, he looked like a little god. Samu Kaál couldn't take his eyes off him.

He derived trust and courage and self-assurance from that sallow face and that twirled moustache.

With a proud bearing, almost haughtily, he marched towards the gallows.

He was turned about to face the company.

The Major who had headed the court martial now mumbled something, but Samu Kaál paid no heed to what he said. He was looking at his master. The Lieutenant - face waxy like a corpse's, but chest thrown out like a true hussar's - looked back at him.

"Be sensible... Have no fear!"

The hangman's assistants seized him. A yell burst from Samu Kaál:

"*Herr Leutnant*, stop them..." He could say no more.

It had been a mere jest, and it was over now. The officer gave the order for prayer.

1898

## ISTVÁN TÖMÖRKÉNY

(1866-1917)

Hungarian literature can hardly boast a writer more Hungarian in his colours and atmosphere than István Tömörkény, who was of German descent. Son of a man named Steingassner, he took his Hungarian name from a little hamlet near Szeged, in southern Hungary. A chemist by profession, he published short stories and special articles in provincial newspapers. His service in the Austro-Hungarian army of occupation took him to Bosnia (now part of Yugoslavia), where he gained an intimate knowledge of the life of poor peasants whose way of life, desires, speech and everyday thoughts found their way into his writing. After his discharge from the army, Tömörkény settled down at Szeged and hardly ever left the vicinity. It was there he wrote his several hundred short stories and sketches. Like Móra, he was the director of the Szeged Museum until his death in 1917. One obituary notice said this about him: "We have scarcely had a greater loss in this war than the death of István Tömörkény."

Tömörkény conducted excavations in villages of the Szeged district - his collecting tours combined his archaeological, ethnographical and literary interests. In his works he portrayed the life and labour of peasants, navvies, farmhands and bargemen (the "water-folk"), going about it - as Zsigmond Móricz wrote of him - with the thoroughness of the scientist, the passion of the collector, the recreating genius of the artist and the humanitarianism of a righteous man. A thousand small details, shades of rustic speech and village folk's ways and views were given weight and shape and made unforgettably impressive in Tömörkény's masterly short stories. One of his writings found its way to Tolstoy, who wrote of it in his diary in terms of highest praise. Like so many contemporary literary critics, the great Russian novelist admired especially Tömörkény's humanism. For, in Tömörkény's writings, abject poverty and dreadful tragedies are always combined with a masterly portrayal of the integrity of poor people, of the strength of their humane feelings.

The extraordinary terseness of his short stories was the result of the need to conform to newspaper space available, but Tömörkény made the most of this compelling circumstance to improve his art, and his figures are as tight-lipped as are the Magyar peasants of the Plain. In his short stories, the plot advances towards the dénouement with certainty and but little encumbered with subsidiary episodes.

## MEN ON THE DAM

There had been signs of low spirits among the men on the dam all week. It does happen, after all, that people get out of bed on the wrong side and then everything rubs them the wrong way. There's hardly a man who doesn't have some grouch or other. Sometimes, if a navvy happens to be digging the earth at the bottom of the pit, he'll stop dead and just stare in front of him; then he'll throw his chest into the harness of his wheelbarrow and, mute and spiteful, trudge up the steep planks to the top of the high dam. His work's one of the hardest; and whoever hasn't grown up in it, can't do it. He may make a brave start on it all right, but it'll lick him for sure before he's halfway through. Navvies know that, and that knowledge gives them a self-respect heightened by the fact that they earn higher wages than other labourers. True, on this account they also swill more brandy than the rest; the job calls for it, they say, without it you'd be done for. They store their brandy in small jugs down in the pit to keep it cool. There's a straw in the jug, and they sip the liquid through it; and they have one common jug for all, or each man has his own. And no matter how often a man goes to take his sip, he will never get drunk, for, as the saying goes, "work takes the sting out of it." The labour of the navvies begins at daybreak, as soon as one can make out the planks on which they push up their wheelbarrows, and it ends at dusk when one can no longer discern them. Theirs is the sort of job that, within a month after going back to work, will wear away all the flesh they've put on during the winter. They are gaunt and lean, all of them, only their legs swell with bulging muscles.

They never work in winter, that is when, for the most part, they 'go socialist.' They do it only for fun, not on principle, for they are the aristocrats among 'labouring folk.' Labour, too, has a social hierarchy of its own. A docker will stay idle throughout the winter from the day the river freezes over and navigation is brought to a standstill; and he will never undertake any other job even though he be hard up, nor does he offer to do any digging in your garden when spring comes along. Not he, he's a docker and will carry loads - if there are any. And if there aren't - well, then it can't be helped, and he'll just have to wait, until something comes his way again. The same goes for the navvy. True, if it's something he can lug in his wheelbarrow, he may - or may not - go after it. But not a step for him without that wheelbarrow of his. Work for him can only mean shifting something from one place to another in his wheelbarrow, whether upwards or downwards. It may be earth to be wheeled up to the top of a high dam, or heavy stones to be wheeled down into a boat lying in shallow water on a hot summer day. Or it may be a fortress he's helping to build, or a railway, or a river dam; he doesn't care a pin. Why, people out on remote farms have even begun recently to hire navvies for setting up silos. In many places the green fodder is no longer put away in pits; it is stacked up in the open and then covered with a layer of earth, so as to allow it to mature.

Now, it'd be impossible to get the earth on top of the stacks if it were not for the navvies. Rural folk can't do the trick. So the navvy gives a hand. Their leader (pit-master, as they call him) sizes up the stack, does some quick calculating, hems and haws, makes his terms, and he and his buddies get down to work. A plank is leant against the stack, and by that footway, too steep for other mortals to mount even without a load, the navvies will sally up, pushing their wheelbarrows. By dusk the job is done, and the team-leader receives and distributes the wages: each of them gets such a tidy sum that many an educated gentleman would willingly accept it for a salary. Now every man packs up his trappings - leather bag, jug, matting, and sheepskin coat - in his wheelbarrow; the spade is stuck in at the side and the stew-pot hung over the board; and so they set out in single file like geese, in search of another job. They are

thin little chaps, with short pipes between their teeth, and *bocskors*<sup>14</sup> on their feet; they might be taken for Slovaks, although any Slovak attempting to do their work for one day would most probably die in the effort. They move along rapidly, for they never walk slowly behind their barrows. It looks as if the barrows were dragging the men along, instead of being pushed by them.

They aren't very talkative, these navvies, indeed. They're a rather silent bunch. If not provoked, they are likely to go on doing their work without so much as a word. Neither do they write any letters home, but send money for the wife by postal order - which is by far the best form of greeting. They stay away from home a long time, for months on end, it may be even from spring till autumn. They lodge under their rushmat awnings, using their sheepskin coats as upholstery, and live on bacon and bread. When they feel like a hot meal, the team cooks a stew in their common pot attached to the wooden tripod. For, like fishermen, they are divided into teams, each team headed by a 'pit-master' who negotiates the jobs and does the reckoning.

Well, as I said, the gang of dam labourers had shown signs of ill temper all week. At the end of the previous week, on Saturday, they had already had a tiff over the pay-off. The engineer had not measured the pits the way they would have it, and his calculations had shown a smaller amount of earth than had actually been excavated; he claimed they had cheated in some of the pits by increasing the height of the *bubas*. The *buba* is a round pillar of earth, a kind of tower, left in the middle of the pit that has been dug; and when the work is finished, the amount of earth that has been excavated is computed, in cubic meters, by the height of this pillar.

The engineer has his own way of computing whereas the 'pit-master' of the navvies merely uses a spadehandle; nevertheless, if there hasn't been any swindling in connection with the *buba*, the two calculations will tally as a rule.

However, navvies have a trick of increasing the height of the *buba*. When night comes, they cleverly sever the little tower of earth in the middle and, after adding about a span of earth, put the upper half back on the lengthened stump. The upper part remains covered with the green grass which was there before the pit had taken the place of the verdant meadow, and it has to stay there as a proof that there's been no monkey business in connection with the *buba*. That is why the earth is inserted in the middle of the pillar, and it is done so skilfully that no one who is not in the know will notice that the *buba* has been meddled with. This cunning trick is practised wherever possible; in fact, it's the general custom among navvies. When the Csángó<sup>15</sup> people were resettled here, they were provided with excavation work, as a means of livelihood. In order to break them in, veteran navvies were appointed as their instructors, and the first thing they taught their kinsmen was how to raise the *buba*, and only after that did they proceed to impart to the newcomers the other knacks of their trade. Now, this can hardly be called laudable proceeding; but then they, in turn, are often the victims of a dirty deal. For instance, they are taken to distant parts of the country, where they have been promised good earth to work in. They have made their terms accordingly, and not until they got there do they discover that they've been cheated, for the earth is clayey or full of pebbles. But now it's too late, for how can they afford to turn about and come back all that long way? It's out of the question. So there's nothing for it but to start hacking away with their spades; and as they

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<sup>14</sup> A kind of sandal or moccasin.

<sup>15</sup> Hungarians living or having once lived in Moldavia and Bukovina.

labour in silence, they keep turning over in their minds how much more satisfying it would be to drive the edge of their spades into something very different.

At such moments, one can sense an inchoate stirring among the men, and the pit-masters stick their heads together. Work, which usually proceeds with machine-like precision, begins to slow down. Faces turn glum. The men on one team are apt to pick a quarrel with those belonging to another. Their ill temper is easily discernible. It could be felt on this occasion, too, when they had not been taken to distant Galicia, or Rumania, or Bosnia to build railway-beds, but were at home on Hungarian soil, raising a dam to curb the waters of the Tisza. The high wide dams lining both banks of the river were the work of their hands.

Like two enormous lazy snakes, the dams might lie idly along the shores of the river for years and years, without seeming to serve any purpose. Immense heaps of props and brushwood and straw are stacked on their flanks and there are large sheds full of bags - with no hint of their possible utility. The water's edge, beyond the willow groves, is far removed from the foot of the dams; it lies so low in its bed that even the smokestack of a passing steamer can scarcely be seen through the branches of the trees. Like an ancient castle wall, the dam stands abandoned for years on end. Its counterpart across the river is hidden behind willows that fade into the grey horizon. At rare intervals, some carriage or clumsy ox-cart passes, and it seems to be moving along the tops of the trees. Roundabout, church spires pierce the distance, and, on the flat, hollow plain, very far off, the smoking chimneys of steam-mills can be seen. Nearer at hand, there are huge corn fields, a few brooklets with sluices, and reeds and rushes here and there - remnants from a world that has gone. Whatever life is astir here is to be found in those rushes, where the coots and ducks, the loons and grebes, make their nests.

And then, suddenly, the water is caught up in a playful mood, and its silent masses begin flowing down irresistibly. Where does all this abundance come from? Where, if it existed before, was it hiding all these years? The water, disdaining an answer, abandons its bed and goes to dwell among the willows. Then it reaches the foot of the dam and creeps up its wall. Gone is its stillness, it has become loquacious now: it rustles among the treetops. Swiftly and still more swiftly it flows and ever more water rushes in to take the place of that which has rolled by, and its natural blonde at times turns an angry brown. Now the space between the two dams becomes a broad canal raised above the level of the ground, and, down below, there is the land in bloom and the lonely farmsteads, and, in the distance, villages and towns.

Everything now depends on how well the dam is built. If it is not well built, the water will break through and the whole countryside will soon become one big cemetery. In town and village the drums begin to roll. The army and the police are set in motion and cart-loads of navvies are rushed to the spot. At the dam, a hard and urgent task awaits them. Props are driven into the ground, the dam is raised and reinforced. Already the water has climbed over two or three lines of props, it is carrying away the brushwood, and keeps eating into the dike. A fourth line of props is laid. From this spot, a week ago, you could admire a pretty acacia grove opposing its tender hues to the lush green of the crops. Now you look for it in vain, the spot where it stood is empty and bald, for the trees have been cut to serve as props. Most likely nobody even bothered to ask whom the grove belonged to.

There aren't any masters here. No one is master, save the navy and the engineer. Troops there are, too: they have driven up labourers from far-off villages and farmsteads, but these are no good for anything except auxiliary work. Now the navy rises in station; the craftsman emerges from among the mass of manual labour.

Nor is it by dint of muscular strength alone that he towers above the rest, but also by the force of his intellect. He is the first to spot a seepage, the first to recognize the looming menace of the huge hulking dam's sliding back a fathom or two from its site. He knows neither night nor day, defies mire and rain, gets drenched by the waves splashing over the dam, and lets his clothes dry on his body while he is waiting. No one could stand up to that kind of drudgery but he, who from springtime till autumn camps in the open, beneath the sky. Full of angry spite, he throws his body into the job; when addressed, he merely growls, his short pipe sticking out from between his teeth as if he meant to threaten the world with it. He lays down one tool only to pick up another. Yet what is this whole countryside to him? What its inhabitants, who are now standing by exhausted in dejected indifference?

Suddenly a muttering spread along the dam. The engineers suspected that something was brewing, but didn't yet know what it was. On the ridge of the dam one of the pit-masters gave a yell.

"Hoy!"

The men belonging to his gang stopped dead. Those who had been pushing their barrows up the planks left them there, right in the middle of the gangway. Spades were thrust into the ground. And hard and hoarse voices replied in succession like the crackling of an abortive volley, "Hoy!" "Hoy!"

An alarming calm succeeded the noise of work. The river - now swollen to a sea, so that the opposite bank had disappeared from sight - was whirling and tossing whole trees at the dam and hurling over it turbulent waves and the props they had pried loose. Its anger had grown into rage. The entire dam was covered with sodden mud, for the navvies had been carrying the earth up onto its back from behind, where water was already seeping through. And now a mud-splashed figure came hurrying along, in whose bedraggled appearance nobody could recognize the gentleman - for who would have found time to change his clothes?

"What's the matter?" he shouted from afar. "What's the idea?"

Nobody replied, only one of the pit-masters pointed a scornful finger at the yellow sea, and said: "Water."

Well, water there was, no doubt of it. Lots of it. You couldn't see a trace of the opposite bank. The trees of the flood area had all disappeared, and in the huge torrent here and there, a roof floats by, torn from some hut on the shore. The wind drove the waves over the drenched dam in sheets which from a distance looked like white sails fluttering. And it seemed - was it a mere illusion, or was it reality? - as if that long ridge of mud were swaying. There where the wind pitched into the water with particular vehemence, pressing it against the bank, the dam seemed about to give way, flapping like a reed-mat beaten by the wind.

"What's eating you people?" the engineer shouted. "Stopping your work like that? Can't you see that the dam's going to break if you quit?"

"Sure it is," the leader of the navvies agreed impassively.

The others kept silent, and the pit-master went on:

"If the water don't drop, that bloomin' dam's goin' to bust for sure. We're just wastin' our time here, heapin' up mud like that. Why, the water's gushin' out wherever you hit the ground with your spade. Look, mister, in this very spot where we're standin', the dam'll break before morning. Down there, the berm's split in three places."

“Then it’s got to be plugged at once,” the engineer shouted. “Get a move on, every one of you! There are enough bags and props. Now get back to work and be quick about it!”

“Not so fast!” said the pit-master. “You see, sir, we’ll go on workin’ all right till the old dam busts. We’ll stick it out, an’ no mistake. Though if the water don’t drop tonight, the dam’s going to crack up some place anyway. Why, it’s already wobblin’ like a snake a-gliding.”

“What’s your game, then?”

“What I mean is we ain’t goin’ to work on tick anymore. Look, sir,” he explained, while the other men clustered round them, “I’ve fixed it up with my mates here that we’re leavin’ this place by Saturday. But we can’t wait that long for our dough ‘cause if the dam goes, everybody’ll be runnin’ for their lives, an’ there’ll be no one to pay us off.”

“No fear of that,” the engineer said.

“Well,” the man went on calmly, “we had that happen to us before. That’s why we want you to pay us for the job we done this week, an’ pay us right away. An’ from now on we get paid every man by the day, and not by the dirt we shovel.”

There was bitterness in the engineer’s voice as he replied:

“So you think I’m in a hole, do you? A fine time you picked to put on the squeeze!”

The pit-master, somewhat put out, began to excuse himself. “We’re poor folks, sir,” he stammered, “an’ we had that happen to us before...”

Coming towards them on the dam there loomed a bespattered gentlemanly figure. He was an army officer, the one who was in charge of the unit dispatched to the scene of the threatened disaster; he was making his round among the sentries. A big, strapping, bluffly sincere man, he would have done better as an acrobat than in clambering about on this god-forsaken dam for eighty forints a month, and not even a chance to go to the barber once in three weeks. As far as his own safety was concerned he had thrown caution to the winds, went about without armed escort, and whenever the cart that was carrying the props got stuck in the mud, he lent a hand in lifting it out. He was liked by all the men working on the site; moreover, his enormous strength and powerful voice commanded respect.

“What’s going on here?” he asked as he reached the spot.

The pit-master was about to tell him, when the engineer cut him short and related the men’s grievance:

“Well, they’re right on that,” the first lieutenant commented. “Are you sure you couldn’t pay them straight-away?”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“No money?” asked the other dejectedly.

“It’s not that,” the engineer retorted angrily. “I’ve got ten thousand forints, but those blockheads have sent all of it down in thousand-forint notes. And where could I get change in these parts?”

“How about the other sectors?”

“I don’t know. If they have any small change there, they won’t part with it anyway, as they need it themselves.”

The mud-splashed men were becoming increasingly vociferous. "What's going on now? Will you or won't you pay?" The pit-master turned about and motioned them to keep quiet, but his words were hardly heeded anymore.

"Just slip me a thousand-forint note, will you," said the officer. "Nothing else will help now. My fifteen men are distributed over a two-mile stretch. Besides, it's no good using force here. Navvies can do more mischief than you would care for, if they have a mind to it."

And flourishing the thousand-forint banknote, the officer walked up to the navvies, who were standing there, idly holding their spades and pickaxes.

"You can't get your pay now," he said. "They've got no change. But the money's there. Here, see this thousand-forint note? And that's not the only one. As you can see, there's no tobacco shop around, where one could get it changed."

"That's true," said some voices from the crowd.

"Now there's your money, I've got it on me, the engineer has given it to me. Whatever happens to the dam, you'll get your pay from me. Well, do you trust me, fellows?"

"We do! Sure!" sounded on every hand. Only the pit-master objected.

"But..." he began.

"Well?"

"What if the dam busts, an' all our things get washed away? Will you pay for them too?"

The first lieutenant, pointing to the banknote, said:

"That's included."

"All right boys, at it again!" the pit-master said, waving at his men; and they all turned back to resume their work. Once more the heavy cudgels began banging away at the props, dripping wheelbarrows went creaking along, and men armed with spades were casting about for an inch of dry earth behind the dam. They checked the level of the water nearly every minute to see whether it was dropping. But it did not. It's not the weather that could do the trick now. The river *would* go down and that damn fast if there'd be a breach on the opposite bank! But you can bet your life the dam over there will hold while this one over here begins to look as if it had been built by children's hands for the fun of it.

The pit-master was scanning its winding contours with the air of a man who knows better.

"Look!" he cried suddenly.

A long way up the river, beyond the small poplar grove, the dam had given way, and a huge, yellow mass was pouring through the gap onto the green fields. It was the river! In the sudden silence that ensued, one could hear its roar as it tugged and clawed at the river bank. Now the game was up. The threat was no longer hanging over them, for the thing had happened and no power on earth could avert it. Only way back in the distance, where the ground began to rise a little, only there would it be possible for the local people - if they knew how - to run up some kind of provisional dyke. Hurriedly, the navvies gathered up their belongings and flinging everything into their wheelbarrows, set out along the dam in search of some place where they could descend. They made great haste; if the dam were to burst in front of them as well, they would be trapped. Down below, carriages were dashing across the fields with the engineers; mounted gendarmes were galloping towards the villages; from somewhere there came already the sound of a church bell tolling. The first lieutenant hastened to pick up his men along the dam. He overtook the navvies, for pushing a wheelbarrow makes heavy going in the mud; but



they didn't mind his leaving them behind, because they were sure they'd find him and the money somewhere, if need be at his home.

"Well, you predicted all this," he said to the pit-master in passing.

The man answered imperturbably from behind his short pipestem, as he continued to push his wheelbarrow:

"Not the first time I've seen a thing like that happen, sir."

The water was spreading swiftly; you could see it gleaming among the tender crops, which, alas, had been sown in vain. Of course, one could not possibly know as yet how far it would spread, for once it had filled up the flats, its advance would be slowed down. It would then be 'grazing' as the saying goes, for its progress would be as leisurely as that of grazing cattle. But should it strike a brooklet or a ditch, it would quickly run way ahead in them and end by overflowing their banks.

The pit-master halted.

"We'd better go down into that village," he said to his mates.

They nodded their assent, and the wheelbarrows got under way again in single file. As they started down the slope, they saw that the water in the ditches had turned yellow, and that, on the lower side of the village, the people were astir in a desperate effort to throw up a dyke. The church bell was ringing. The pit-master put his whole weight into the harness of his wheelbarrow.

"Come on. Let's get a move on."

They made for the scene of action. Down there, things looked really bad, for if the people there did not succeed in enclosing that small stretch of land with a dyke, then the flood would run right into the middle of the village and at once wash the church away. They were working like mad shovelling the earth, lugging it in bread-baskets and manure barrows. The first lieutenant had arrived with his men. The soldiers had climbed up to the roofs of the huts and were throwing and carrying down the thatches. Their officer was pulling up a large section of fencing at one go and throwing it against the dyke to form a breastwork. But the water proved to be the stronger, for its pressure was growing steadily, and the centre of the loosely-constructed little dyke gave way. The flood came rushing through the gap. There were screams from the womenfolk, while the men stood sad and mute. The first lieutenant, seizing two soldiers with his powerful arms, jumped with them into the breach. At that moment the gang of navvies appeared and the pit-master let out a penetrating yell.

"At it, boys!"

Sheepskin coats and rush-mats flew from the wheelbarrows, and the rustic masters of the art of trapping water flung the might of their arms into the struggle. First they spread matting in front of the men standing in the water up to their hips, another group rushed up earth, while a third set, after wrenching the trellised gate off the church fence and covering it with matting, planted it upright in the ground and began to fill in earth behind it.

"That's that," the pit-master said proudly when they were done with the task and the breach had been filled.

They continued to help wherever this was necessary, and after that the pit-master turned towards the first lieutenant.

"What about that banknote, sir? I suppose it's melted away?"

“Not a bit!” replied the officer. “The water only reached up to my waist.”

“Then you’d better pay us off, sir, and we’ll beat it. There ain’t much more we could do here anyway.”

The men in sandals clustered round and made it plain that it was really high time for them to get their due.

“All right,” the officer said and started out though he was dripping wet. “There must be somebody here that can give us change. Let’s go to the parish hall. But as a matter of fact, I’ve no idea how much you are supposed to get!”

“Never mind. *I* know,” the pit-master said. “As you couldn’t figure it out by the amount of earth anyway, so we get day wages. Three whole days’ wages for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and till nine o’clock this morning - another quarter day. That’s what’s due to each hand.”

“And how about the job you’ve done here?”

The pit-master shook his head.

“That don’t count,” he said. “It wasn’t for the gentry we did it.”

The men nodded in token of their agreement.

1899

## JENŐ HELTAI

(1871-1957)

“The story of my life? It’s a very ordinary and tedious affair, not worth the trouble to put it down on paper; still less to read it,” Heltai wrote. “Like most people, I was born; then, at the age of twelve, made up my mind that I must become a poet and journalist.” Even before leaving secondary school, he made good on this resolution by publishing some poems. He enrolled in the Faculty of Law, but soon gave up his studies to enter journalism. At first, he tried his hand at serious writing, but, in due time, turned a humorous writer. “Since then, I’ve been rowing away in the galley of Humour, a slave despairing of release,” he wrote, half jokingly, half seriously in 1913, and added, “I wish to go on writing for a few more years, and then to choose a respectable profession.”

In newspaper articles, comedies, novels, short stories and screen plays he captured many a feature of big-city life; like Andor Gábor, he began - as a disciple of the fashionable French moderns - by ridiculing the curiosities of the new-fledged big city in *chansons*, sketches and skits, but did so somewhat more sentimentally and mildly and more indulgently than his fellow-writer. After the failure of the two revolutions, he became more and more resigned and bitter; however, his writings dating from that period too are suffused with serenity, though of a now dimmer shade than his old optimism. The best of his plays - *A néma levente* (The Silent Knight), *A kis kávéház* (The Small Café), *Az ezerkettedik éjszaka* (The Thousand and Second Night), etc. - novels - *Family Hotel*, *A 111-es* (Room No.111), *Az utolsó bohém* (The Last Bohemian), *Jaguár*, etc. - and his several hundred short stories have been translated into many languages and he has supplied the stories for a number of films made in various countries.

A several-volume edition of his collected works - poems, novels, short stories, sketches, plays and fables - was published in recent years.

## SISTERS THREE

### 1

The Tündérlaki Sisters were three in number: two of them were respectable, the third was not. The two respectable girls were called Mariska and Jolán; the one who was not was Putyi.

Putyi was not even an actress - just a sort of show-girl. She led an immoral life, for she had a friend (just one, to be sure) who was very rich and kept her as his mistress. He had a large apartment furnished for her, showered her with money and jewelry, and provided lavishly for her clothing.

Mariska and Jolán lived with Putyi, who kept them supplied with dresses, hats, jewels and money. For Putyi was a good sister and had a very high esteem for their respectability. Mariska and Jolán also prided themselves on being respectable and having to give nothing in return for their lodging, their silk stockings, plumed hats and patent leather shoes.

Apart from that, Mariska had a special reason for carrying her head high. She wanted to become a teacher, indeed she already had her diploma and expected to receive an appointment any day. But it was slow in coming, in spite of the gracious intervention of the baron - Putyi's friend - who had gone to the length of seeing in person a few aldermen and councillors, even the Mayor himself.

By contrast, Jolán was a girl much given to day-dreaming. Her dreams were centred on marriage. Respectable, honest Matrimony, such as was the lot of every decent middle-class maiden. With a three-room flat, doing her own cooking and quarrelling with the maid.

Ah, ah, and again ah! The dream possessed her; it was the sole object of her existence. She lived in eager expectation of the day when the Man, the Husband, would come and redeem her.

Thus they waited, all three of them waited. Mariska for her Letter of Appointment; Jolán for her Husband; and Putyi for the dreams of her sisters to come true.

### 2

One day Mariska came home, beaming with joy.

"Oh, Putyi," she said, "this time it really looks as if I'll get that appointment after all. The gentleman on whom it depends has sent word for me to come and see him this afternoon."

"At last!" Putyi exclaimed.

"Well, I see your lucky star is rising," said Jolán. "But where's mine hiding so long?" she added, with a sigh.

At this they pondered a while.

"I think," Putyi said, "that I'll have to take a hand in this. You'll never find a husband by yourself. So *I* am going to find one for you."

"Oh, Putyi," Jolán said blissfully, "*you* can do anything once you've made up your mind."

Putyi looked at her, deeply touched.

“How stupid of us not to have thought of this before. A poor girl like you might just sit there waiting for her Prince Charming till Kingdom Come. Money rules the world, my dear, and suitors are giving you a wide berth, thinking you haven’t got a penny. But they are very much mistaken, for I’ve decided this very moment to give you twenty thousand crowns for a dowry.”

Jolán was struck dumb with happiness.

“Twenty thousand crowns!...” she whispered at last.

Mariska was deeply affected. “You’re the best sister that ever lived,” she said.

“Yes,” said Putyi, equally moved. “Say what you will, I’m a good girl. These twenty thousand crowns are all I possess, but I’ll give them to you.”

### 3

Shortly before the show was due to start, Mariska came back from the gentleman who had the last word in the matter of her appointment. She was looking gloomy.

“Anything wrong?” Putyi asked sympathetically.

“Why, yes, more or less,” Mariska said.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing much... You see, it’s all settled now, and I could get my appointment right away, but the old chap’s made it clear that he won’t do it for nothing.”

“So he wants money!”

“Oh no! It’s... I seem to have made a hit with him and...”

“I see.”

Putyi reflected. So did Jolán. Mariska kept silent. After a brief pause Putyi inquired:

“What did you tell him?”

“What *could* I?” Mariska flared up, offended. “Do you think I’d let a man like that come near me? Do you think I could ever do such a thing? You know my principles...”

Putyi got alarmed.

“Please, please, don’t misunderstand me. I know you’re a respectable girl... Still... But tell me, how did it all end?”

“I turned my back on him. Walked out of his office. I told him he might as well never appoint me, for I would die rather than do something shameful.”

Jolán voiced her approval.

“You were quite right,” she said.

“Absolutely,” Putyi agreed. “And what about him? What did *he* say?”

“He said I was a foolish girl, I should think it over, after all, my future depended on it, and he wanted to be of help. He told me to come and see him again tomorrow, but I told him I would never show my face in his office again, and burst into tears. But, on the way home, I began to change my mind, I thought it would be such a pity for me to miss this wonderful opportunity... Don’t you think so?”

“Why, of course,” said Jolán.

“Absolutely,” said Putyi.

“It occurred to me that there might be a way out...”

“What way?” asked Putyi.

“Well, I thought that someone ought to go and see that man and explain to him that I’m not the sort of girl who would do such a thing. If someone were to appeal to him that, for once, he should behave like a gentleman and not misuse his authority...”

“All right, but who is to go there?” asked Jolán.

“Maybe Putyi... She’s got a name, a glib tongue and a way of impressing people, so...” Mariska said, with some hesitation.

Putyi turned pale.

“You think I should go?”

Mariska plucked up courage.

“Why not, Putyi? It isn’t such a great sacrifice - why shouldn’t you do it for your sister? I bet it won’t cost you more than a word, and I’ll have my appointment.”

Putyi looked at Jolán, as though expecting her to protest. But Jolán said: “Ah, Putyi, you’re such a good girl... You’ve provided for me, and you’re bound to do something for poor Mariska as well.”

“But... But what if that gentleman refuses to do it for me too... for nothing?” Putyi asked bitterly.

The two others smiled at each other and said in unison: “Come, come, Putyi.”

#### 4

Mariska’s appointment was also the making of Jolán. One of Mariska’s fellow-teachers began to frequent the Tündérlaki home. He fell in love with Jolán. She was not averse to the young man, whose infatuation grew rapidly when he learned that he was wooing twenty thousand crowns. Mariska added fuel to his fire.

“You had better ask Putyi for my sister’s hand.”

“I beg your pardon?... Why Miss Putyi?”

“Because she’s the head of the family, you know. It’s she that is giving the twenty thousand crowns.”

The teacher turned a bit pale.

“Oh, I see.”

“Yes. Any objection?”

“Well... er... it is a bit awkward. You mustn’t misunderstand me, Miss Mariska. I have a very high opinion of Miss Putyi, your sister. But... you see... er... I’m a man of peculiarly delicate feelings...”

Mariska gave him an icy look.

“Nonsense! Jolán is a fine girl and you’re a fine man: you’ll make a happy couple. Nothing else counts. You’re wasting precious moments through your shilly-shallying.”

The teacher stammered something. But afterwards he considered that common sense is the key to success, so he donned his frock-coat, called on Putyi, and asked Jolán’s hand in marriage.

Putyi was practically in tears with joy; in an access of maternal affection she gave the two her blessing.

Jolán and her fiancé were a picture of bliss. Day after day the teacher turned up at the home of his betrothed, where he partook of a substantial meal and helped himself to the baron’s cigars and cigarettes. Yet, as he had pointed out himself, he was a man of peculiarly delicate feelings.

“I don’t like this sort of thing,” he would remark to Jolán, almost every time they met. “If I could help it, I would rather decline your dowry.”

Jolán was indignant.

“What a crazy idea! To throw away so much money!”

“No, but after all... Your sister’s a wonderful girl, I admit. But honour does come first, don’t you think?”

“No doubt,” Jolán agreed with firm conviction.

“And once we are husband and wife...”

“What then?”

“I hope you won’t take it amiss, darling, but I would rather we didn’t cultivate her...”

“Just as you wish, dearest,” Jolán said obediently. She looked up at her fiancé with a beaming face.

## 5

The Tündérlaki Sisters, as I have said, were three in number: two of them were respectable, the third was not.

1911

## GYULA KRÚDY

(1878-1933)

“I ran away from the paternal home to become a journalist, became infatuated with a provincial actress, felt happy, was an artist, plied the bottle, had my fling, made love - I don't know what came over me,” Gyula Krúdy writes in his autobiography. Such, indeed, was his life. Born into a family of the provincial gentry, he lived in Budapest for the best part of his life, and in his writings we find the poesy of his native Nyírség district, of the Hungarian countryside, as well as the whirligig of urban life, of young petticoat-chasers and flirtatious women, literary cafés, Turkish baths, horse-races, big battles fought at the card-table, and trysting-places. He put himself into many fictitious figures - now he was Sindbad the mariner, now Kázmér Rezeda, the impecunious and enamoured poet, a man always full of yearnings, always on the move, always after women and food, and professing the vanity of life. His impressionistic sketches, the numerous little episodes he knew and told about the Hungary of his time constitute a lasting lifework - the picture of a world and an attitude.

Krúdy has been called “the Hungarian Proust,” perhaps because there hovers about his figures that kind of poesy, that approach blending past and future, which is so characteristic of the great French writer; and because Krúdy's life and art also embody a constant search of uncapturably fleeting Time, in remembrance of things past.

He is one of the most poetical of Hungarian writers of fiction. The atmosphere of his writings, the heroes - “hazy knights,” as he called them - of his short stories and novels, added new colours to the spectrum of Hungarian letters. This was linked with the deep, vibrant tone of his prose, which found so many imitators after his death, and with his attitude as a man and writer, to which his works owed their magic and popularity - a spleen that is specifically Magyar, a sense of the joys and inexplicable sorrows of life.

He was a prolific writer. Whenever he had lost money at cards or on the turf, he would sit down in a café and write away in his pearly hand, immortalizing the adventures of jockeys and ladies of easy virtue and journalists who fought duels with army officers. There are Krúdy fans who claim to own a hundred and twenty or thirty books written by him. An enumeration of the most important of his novels can be but a haphazard one: *A vörös postakocsi* (The Scarlet Mail-coach), *Hét bagoly* (Seven Owls), *Boldogult úrfikoromban* (The Young Gentleman that I Once Was), *Asszonyások díja* (The Wages of Good Women), *Reseda Kázmér szép élete* (The Good Life of Kázmér Rezeda), *Az útitárs* (The Fellow Traveller). His principal volumes of short stories are: *Szindbád*, *Tótágas* (The Head-Stand), *Az élet álom* (Life's a Dream), and *Egy pohár borovicska* (One Glass of Gin).



## DEATH AND THE JOURNALIST

Titus Finehouse,<sup>16</sup> the journalist, had been sentenced to death by the directors of the Club, in the room, where the members usually held their conferences and courts of honour, and set down the rules for forthcoming duels.

The room had served this purpose ever since it had been the site of a ball in honour of Albert, Prince of Wales, at the end of which the participating gentlemen had fought one another with champagne bottles and had snatched the violins and flutes out of the musicians' hands to beat each other up with. After that memorable occasion, no further rioting had taken place in this room of dark memories; it had, on the contrary, been used only for honourable purposes. The lives of rooms may thus change, no less than those of the people who live in them. Rooms know no shame; only women can be as shameless as rooms.

Titus had written an insulting article about the Club: it was for this that he had to die. P. E. G., retired colonel of the Hussars and member of the Club, who was known as the best marksman in Hungary, had been detailed to execute the verdict. The journalist's fate was thus sealed. He could now, while still among the living, give away without the slightest compunction all his worldly goods, to the extent he ever possessed any; no doubt, he would not need them any more.

Following the time-honoured practice on the occasion of trumped-up family misfortunes, Finehouse's first thought was to ask his editor for an advance. An advance will reconcile a journalist with death no less than with life.

Having received his advance, he nonchalantly left Elderberry Street, where for many years he had struggled, at a hostile writing desk, with poor pens, watery inks and, even worse, with the complexities of syntax, cropping up always when he intended to write his most brilliant articles. With the advance in his pocket, Finehouse made up his mind to die like a gentleman. Let us observe how our hero, in anticipation of his own demise, accomplished this feat.

To begin with, the journalist had to get hold of a suitable hat, for his own, as a result of his nocturnal mode of life (when nobody could see it anyway), already resembled the headgear occasionally left behind in cafés in lieu of payment. The customer takes to his heels, and the hat waits in vain to be called for. It rarely occurs that a customer, after having departed on the pretence of "just going across the street," ever returns for his hat. Finehouse, as a rule, came by his hats, umbrellas and canes in cafés - not through fraud, God forbid - but simply through the grace of Olga, the cashier of the café where he usually hung out every night. However, we must not have any misgivings regarding Olga's and Finehouse's friendship. The journalist would simply stand about at the cashier's desk - just like other night-birds, who spend their lives in cafés - and tell Olga all sorts of things he had heard in the editorial office. From these talks Olga could have become acquainted with the world of politics and literature. Yet she never showed the least interest in any of the people Finehouse kept telling her about in his dull stories. Nor was she surprised when unavoidable circumstances obliged her to stand surety with the side-whiskered waiter on behalf of some of the journalists (and, of course, of Finehouse too) in connection with scrambled eggs, ham-sandwiches, pickled sausages,

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<sup>16</sup> The Hungarian names in this story have humorous connotations. They have been freely anglicized in an effort to preserve their flavour. The hero's name in Hungarian is Széplaki, which literally would mean, something like "He of the lovely cottage."

sardines, wienerwursts served with horse-radish, slices of salami, bread and butter, pickled herrings, lean slices of bacon, smoked sausages, or whatever else a penniless journalist usually subsisted on.

And Olga was not surprised even when Finehouse, lanky and pale, holding his hat under his arm, informed her with a martyr's solemnity that his ill fate could not be averted, that he had to die young, in the very middle of a promising career and without having finished the great work, which he, as an old-fashioned journalist, constantly dreamed about in times of need, and from which he always hoped a change for the better. This great work, it is true, he had never even begun although he had told everybody that he was always working at it in the small hours of the morning. And now there he stood, before Olga's throne, unshaven, blue-lipped and bleary-eyed. He expected some sort of a miracle from her, like a drowning man, who catches at a straw. Olga, however, maintained her placid indifference, sustained by her shawl, hat and coat, hanging within hand's reach in case she had to flee from some drunken customer. In matters, such as the supplying of cigarettes or of a tip for the janitor to open the house-door after midnight, this woman would at times show incomparable kindness! But now, as she considered T. F.'s situation, she could not hide a smile, which served to pass a bitter judgement on her own fate too:

"One must die somehow or other," she said.

"But surely not in such a shabby old hat!" the condemned man burst out indignantly.

Olga came from southern Hungary, her moods changed quickly, and looking at Finehouse's hat, her natural kindness gained the upper hand again.

"It is really worn-out! Not even worth pressing!" she remarked, examining the hat with womanly care. Then she left her throne, and went into a small closet, in which various objects left by their owners were stowed away by the employees of the café.

"It was left behind by a customer who swore he was about to drown himself in the Danube. Try it on, Titus."

Finehouse put the hat on his head and surveyed himself in the mirror from all sides. He liked the hat, but he did not want Olga to know it. So he said:

"Isn't it strange that this hat should all of a sudden remind me of the small provincial town where I spent part of my childhood? Such hats used to be worn by men in green breeches who came there in pairs, with all sorts of wires and knives hanging from their belts - men at whose sight the dogs began to bark madly, smelling animal blood on them."

"Sowgelders!" exclaimed Olga, and now she also looked at the hat in amusement for, coming from the country herself, she knew those wandering youths, whose profession it was to rob animals of their sex. "Let me tell you, Titus, that none of your colleagues ever had such a hat! They will turn green with envy, when you appear in it! The editor of the *Concord* has been asking for it, but I did not give it him. I wanted to reward some gifted young poet with it, but there are no gifted poets nowadays."

Finehouse did not take off the Tyrolese hat, for he thought it made him look like one of the squirearchy. He stood there, his spirits rising, as if suddenly his chest had been relieved of the weight that had been compressing it for hours almost to the point of choking him.

Olga now handed him the umbrella-cane.

"Well, Titus, tell me honestly, did any newspaper scribbler here in Budapest ever have an umbrella that was a cane at the same time?"

Finehouse was indeed amazed at this peculiar cane, out of which, in the event of rain, one could pull an umbrella. He tried out the trick right away and held the opened umbrella over his hat:

“Such presents are given to old economists to commemorate their twenty-fifth jubilee...”

“You’re telling me!” Olga replied.

“Or to a middle-class husband, who, in the course of a long married life, has already received from his wife such a variety of little presents for name-days, birthdays, jubilees, that he possesses everything from ties to smoker’s sets. While my waistcoat pocket is, of course, full of tobacco.”

In speaking as he did, Titus was not free from hidden excitement, as he turned the odd treasure around in his hand. Although his brow was clouded, there was a sparkle of hope in his eyes, because the possibility occurred to him that he might survive the duel by some stroke of good luck and that, being in possession of the green hat and the umbrella-cane, he might rise in the world.

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“What a splendid woman, that Olga!” Titus kept saying to himself on leaving the Franciscan Café. Never once did he think of going to the editorial office; although he might have caused a sensation there with his new outfit, he would risk being caught by the bilious editor and being entrusted, on the eve of his death, with writing up the evening news. He would rather die than see the news-bulletin now! He would sooner lose his job than work like a slave tonight of all nights, he, the proud owner of a new hat and umbrella-cane! He would degrade himself if - at a time like this - he were to hang around that smelly office, acting the busybody and begging for work, for anything to prove himself useful at all costs! Simpletons of journalism might do this, men who never had had any experience in life - not to speak of a duel with pistols. Not even here, on the Danube embankment, where the bullet was sure to miss one and splash into the river, even if the pistols were loaded - as experienced seconds were in the habit of saying.

The clock on Franciscan Square was striking ten, when Finehouse, driven by an inner compulsion, directed his steps towards the National Club, where the court of honour had passed the death sentence on him.

At first, it was only from the opposite side of Hatvani Street that he dared to scrutinize the castle-like one-storied building, through the open doorway of which the coaches were driving, their wheels rattling to a stop, directly in front of a flight of stairs covered with a red-velvet carpet. After they had deposited the guests, the porter in cherry-red livery slammed the coach door, causing the big lamp hanging in the archway to quiver. The coaches then drove into the inner court, turned around the fountain and left through the other gateway, passing into Szép Street. The dimly lit Club windows were closed tight, as if none of those behind them ever needed fresh air - though it was a mild night in early autumn, when the sky is full of stardust.

Our hero, lurking in a doorway, gazed rapturously at this grim building, where life and death were unimportant, as if the gentlemen who visited that exclusive house, had other ways of living and of dying than did common mortals! What would happen, for instance, if Titus were now to step across the street and ask a coachman in cherry-red livery after P. E. G., retired colonel of the Hussars, so that he might at least have a word with the gentleman who was going to kill him the next day? Most likely, the coachman would disdain to have anything to do with him; maybe he would even bawl him out if he recognized him, for these old Club employees, of course, knew the rules of duelling. The opponents were not supposed to meet

before the duel, and so Finehouse would only expose himself to horrible humiliation. With his old hat on, he might have done it, but now the “sowgelder’s hat,” as he called it to himself, gave him a certain self-assurance. He left his hiding place and made a detour through Kerepesi Street, coming back on the other side of Hatvani Street, the side on which the Club stood. He sauntered along like an indifferent stroller, without looking at that feudal castle as he passed its open portal, his umbrella-cane swinging on his arm, for it had a conveniently crooked handle, which one could put over one’s wrist. It swung to and fro, now and again tapping against his knees, as if to reassure him. Indeed, in possession of such an umbrella-cane, nobody could possibly debase himself to such an extent as to crave pettily for mercy. And Titus, with a purposeful air, turned into elegant Szép Street, in order to save his face before the cherry-red club porter, who, it appeared to him, was looking at him with irony and contempt, as if this impudent servant had guessed why the journalist was strolling in the vicinity of the Club... And, having entered Szép Street, Titus passed along the curtained windows, behind which the gentlemen were no doubt eating their supper and gazing admiringly at the colonel - like at a rare kind of lobster.

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In the course of his walk through the narrow dark streets of the inner city, Finehouse once more found himself in Franciscan Square; for the habit of many years kept on bringing him back to this same place. He called himself a stupid ass for not going to some distinguished restaurant, since the “whole town” must know about his fatal duel by now, and he could well show himself to the world, for all and sundry would be talking about his affair in any case. He could demonstrate his fearlessness, his determination, his courage all the more easily now that he had a suitable hat and an umbrella-cane to cut a handsome figure with. Why shouldn’t he, for once, enjoy being the centre of attention, considering that so many people regarded this as the acme of pleasure. When would T. F., the insignificant journalist, ever again be in a position to have people point at him saying: “There goes the journalist who had the courage to challenge death in the execution of his professional duty...” When would he again be noticed in those circles where duels inspired respect? When would those ironical, contemptuous, sneering, mean eyes of his fellow-beings turn respectful, if not tonight of all nights, the last night of his life, which, with the advance money in his pocket, he could spend in carefree merriment?

Finehouse fancied himself in the middle of a distinguished restaurant, where the gipsies were playing for him alone, and the women, dressed for the theatre, kept turning their heads towards him, their hearts a-flutter, for he was far and away the most interesting man in town at present, ready, for the sake of honour, to encounter a roaring lion and face certain death.

“You could really afford a better supper today,” the Tyrolese hat advised him recklessly. “A beefsteak for instance in some swanky restaurant, where they not only know how to spell beefsteak correctly, but also how to prepare it properly.”

“With a fried egg,” the umbrella-cane added, tapping against his side.

“You have money, yet you have no idea how to be a gentleman,” the hat reproached him while he continued his way towards the small pub in the Athenaeum building. “You will never be a gentleman if you miss such an opportunity. You should go to the Grand Hotel Hungaria or the Hotel Bristol, to let everyone there see that you, too, exist in this world and that you intend to die on the field of honour. If you don’t like beefsteaks, why, find something else on the menu which the kowtowing waiter will hand you. Fowl perhaps... or maybe young hare - it is in season again since the middle of August. With bay leaves swimming in the sauce around its

saddle. And they say one has luck in a duel, if one finds shot in the meat. Don't order crab, the market is swamped with it at this time of the year. You would not manage it anyhow, for it takes skill to eat crab in a mannerly fashion. Order something from the grill, instead, and the waiter will honour you with humble, apologetic looks, while you wait impatiently for the meat to appear. Just think, what your editor would do if *he* could have a duel played up in the newspapers for days! He would get all he could out of the occasion, *he* would! But you are too stupid even to make the acquaintance of some nosy society Lady."

Finehouse nearly gave way to the obstinate urging that resounded in the tapping of his umbrella-cane and in the rustling of the tuft of chamois hair at the back of his hat: "Be a social lion, if only for a day, before you have to die!"

It was then that he passed a street vendor, who sold all sorts of fruit from a small cart by the light of a lamp. Grapes and nuts were an expensive luxury at the moment, being out of season, and found few day-time buyers; but the reckless fly-by-nights took to them with delight. In order to celebrate this unique day by an extravagance, Finehouse bought a paper bag full of grapes and nuts and paid for them without even bargaining.

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"I was not born to be a gentleman, although I shall have to die tomorrow just as if I were one!" said Finehouse to himself unhappily, as, with the paper bag tucked under his arm, he entered the small night-pub which kept open only for the sake of type-setters and similar nocturnal workers whose soberness could be taken for granted, and who were more likely to come here for food than for amusement. The publican's name was Kersantz, and journalists, accustomed as they were to coffee-house life, could frequent his place only on rare occasions, as it cost them more than to sit in a coffee-house, where they could limit themselves to sipping their coffee, plain or with milk, while everybody who wished to make a night of it at Kersantz's place was obliged both to eat and to drink. One had to spend money here, and printers alone would be granted credit, for they would pay up regularly every Saturday. Even an editor-in-chief would not get anything without paying cash; and that is why Finehouse was by no means completely dissatisfied with his choice, when he decided to spend the last night of his life in this respectable night-pub.

He took a seat at a comfortable corner-table, like someone who is thoroughly sure of himself.

It did not escape his attention that Kersantz, the silent redbearded Swabian who was carefully measuring his wine at the counter, like a chemist weighs out his powders, that this mute Kersantz favoured Finehouse's new hat and umbrella-cane with an appreciative look. Was he, perhaps, saying to himself that this umbrella would some day come into his possession anyhow? But who could fathom the thoughts of an innkeeper? Only moneyless people suspect the innkeeper of watching them steadily to keep them from running away without paying.

Finehouse asked for the bill of fare from the undersized waiter whose attention had been drawn to the new guest by a low voiced "Over there, John" from the innkeeper. It was the first time in his life that such a distinction was conferred upon Titus Finehouse. There is no denying it, publicans can see into their customers' pockets.

John crossed himself, catching sight of Mr. Finehouse at the corner-table. He approached hesitatingly as if he saw a ghost.

"I was told, sir, that you had been shot in a duel."

“Dreams of the future!” replied Titus with a laugh, and continued in the particular jargon which journalists reserve for waiters, “Yes indeed, John, dreams of the future. You should be more attentive, I mean, open your ears better when you are eavesdropping at Marich’s table.”

John’s face, incapable of hiding his feelings, now revealed even greater amazement.

“Sure enough, it was at Marich’s table tonight that the printers said your life, sir, was not worth a brass farthing. And that you were already dead...”

In the inner room of the vaulted public house, there was a long table upon which the printers had put a sign in beautiful big letters, reading: “Marich’s table.” Mr. Marich was at that time the most renowned type-setter, who could boast of having set Francis Deák’s famous Easter article.<sup>17</sup> And this Mr. Marich, a very respectable, tall and dignified gentleman, as a rule, made his appearance after midnight, when he would assume the presidency at the table.

Titus was flattered at being the subject of discussion even at Marich’s table, for it was a table frequented by the most respected printers; but he pretended not to be interested in the excitement of the waiter, who stood there slapping his knees with his napkin, as if trying to wake himself from his dreams.

“Would you care for lights with pickles?” he said at last, remembering dimly that Titus, whenever he ate here, would order this cheap, unappetizing dish. Titus always asked for half a lemon with this course and praised the cook for taking the trouble to cut the lights into small square pieces so that they would not be underdone.

Titus did not heed John’s offer and merely murmured, under his breath, something to the effect that this little fellow wanted “to pickle him,” as if his whole body, and life, and profession, and his mood as well were not already pickled sufficiently!

“I want a broiled cock!” Titus snapped, noticing that this was the most expensive course on the modest bill of fare.

“Fricassee of chicken, very good, sir!”

“I said, cock! One that was not caponized in youth, like some editors of no talent! One that lived to be a cock, and ran after young servant-girls and took a peck at the nurses, too!”

Who knows how long our hero would have gone on praising the merits of the cock he meant to devour tonight, calling after the departing waiter to serve up the cock’s spurs, not to mention its liver and gizzard, when he was cut short by the sudden appearance of a fiery red moustache on the threshold of the pub.

There are all sorts of red moustaches. Most of them are venomous, malignant, neglected emblems of the male, unworthy of cultivation, if only because of their colour. This particular red moustache, however, was the one exception in a hundred, representing good humour, sprightliness, satisfaction and *joie de vivre*, as if the corners of the mouth under the moustache were fixed in a permanent smile. This red moustache deserved to be cultivated and well treated, and to be patted frequently, like a faithful dog. There were round spectacles above the red moustache, one of those funny horn-rim spectacles eternally wobbling on the bridge of the nose, with a ribbon hanging over the ears and lenses behind which the eyes seem to radiate perpetual kindness.

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<sup>17</sup> Article by the Hungarian statesman, published in 1865, dealing with some problems in connection with the planned compromise between Austria and Hungary, concluded finally in 1867.

But it was the tie under this moustache that riveted one's attention. A *lavallière*, with white and blue dots, it nevertheless boasted a pin, shaped as a boar's head with ruby eyes.

And, indeed, it was the pin of a game-dealer, called Andrew Aurous. This name was a heritage from the days when he had worked as a journalist, before switching to the career of game dealer.

"I'm glad to find you here, Titus," began the ex-journalist, who used to come quite often to this pub, from his nearby house, to inhale the smell of the press, as he put it. Because, even as a game-dealer, he could not forget that peculiar smell. "I read in the paper that you have established certain connections with the squirearchy, with the National Club, with the counts. I want to recommend my old Drawing-room Calendar to you, the one I compiled when I was trying to bring together Hungary's men of literature and the aristocracy. A count, followed by an author - a countess, by a woman writer... That's how my calendar was compiled, interspersed with narratives, verses and portraits."

"Not a bad idea," the journalist replied. "But, for the time being, I am a man condemned to death."

Andrew Aurous, however, was not the man to give up, at the first hurdle, a plan for the sake of which he had left his house in Bástyá Street at such a late hour.

"Literature has taken a turn for the worse. Lewis Chatty is now always writing about railway workers, ever since he created the character of Adam Churly in his comic paper. The idea of writing about conductors and watchmen! One should write about counts and countesses, anything else is of no account. There will never be a genuine Hungarian literature, until writers and magnates are on a par."

"On a par, right you are," Finehouse replied. "But, I am, as I mentioned before, condemned to death, until further notice and now I shall drink a 'Chatty.'"

"That's just the trouble," exclaimed Andrew Aurous, the compiler of the one-time Drawing-room Calendar, fingering his watch-chain, which sported a boar's tusk, set in silver of course. "Wine and soda is named by the innkeepers after Chatty, instead of being named after Count Andrassy or Prince Festetich. That's why you modern Hungarian writers never get anywhere! Now we of the older generation might have directed literature into proper channels. But you took the pen out of our hands, and here you are now, against the Club and against the whole aristocratic world!"

Our hero answered cynically:

"A 'Chatty' is a grand concoction: one part wine, one part mineral water and one part soda."

The 'literary' game-dealer could only shake his head over so much pigheadedness.

"I have preserved my connections with the aristocracy, and I must say, I never had cause to regret it. I still get pheasants from Count Berchtold's woods."

"I never touch pheasant," Finehouse interrupted in a mood bordering on anarchism.

"All the rabbits shot on Count Degenfeld's estate are delivered to me, for I have a contract with those people."

"I can easily do without roast rabbit."

At that moment the game-dealer caught sight of the Tyrolese hat, with the tuft of chamois-hair, hanging on the peg, and could not refrain from remarking:

“Well, brother, to judge by your hat, one might almost think you too belonged to the gentry.”

“I don’t want to belong anywhere!” replied Titus, throwing a contemptuous look at the tell-tale hat and at the game-dealer as well.

All of a sudden, without warning, the fiery red moustache appeared in its true light and revealed that sly venom, concealed under every red moustache.

“In that case, consider my visit as nonexistent, though I did come here entirely for your sake!”

And with this the game-dealer departed, conscious of his importance, authority and wealth, shaking his head, convinced that his intervention aimed at reconciling Hungary’s literary circles with the aristocratic world had been in vain. At home, he no doubt complained to his wife about the ingratitude of Hungarian writers towards would-be benefactors.

Finehouse, too, felt some misgivings at being abandoned at the corner-table in the company of John and a chicken fricassee. Perhaps he was missing his last opportunity of making peace with his opponent... Who knows the ways of Providence? Might it not be better to be the editor of that Drawing-room Calendar and to outlive the coming day?

“I thought I told you I wanted cock,” Finehouse grumbled at the solicitous waiter, who, in the absence of other guests, was standing at the journalist’s table, and looked on in apparent amazement as bite after bite of the chicken leg disappeared in the mouth of the dead man, until only the bone remained.

Since John, not knowing what to say, made no reply, Finehouse continued impatiently:

“There is no real service nowadays, not even at Kersantz’s! Under the circumstances, there’s no choice but to avoid this establishment in future. Thank God, I shall have a very good reason for staying away. Bang!” he shouted, pointing a salt crescent at his forehead.

“Bang!” repeated the little waiter, and slipped away unobtrusively, as if he found it decidedly unpleasant to be near a corpse.

Left to himself and having nobody to chat with, Finehouse returned to his lugubrious thoughts. We shall not attempt to describe all his animadversions; there was, however, an ever-recurring picture of a red horse ridden by a man in checkered trousers and top hat, and carrying the caption: “Time flies.” Would it not be better for him - Finehouse - to fly too, instead of senselessly facing the fatal pistol? He had kneaded a tidy little heap of pellets from the breadcrumbs, when the door once more opened - again in Finehouse’s honour.

“I seem to make business thrive here,” said Finehouse to himself, recognizing in the newcomers his seconds. They did not belong to the literary profession, but were so-called gentlemen of leisure. On catching sight of them, Finehouse felt a convulsion in the region of his diaphragm and could barely keep down the chicken he had just devoured. Every nerve tingled painfully intolerably; he was seized by ghastly shivering, and his face froze at the sight of the two gentlemen, who greeted him jovially, recounting that they had been looking for him “all over town,” until at last somebody had told them in the editorial office that if they did not find the journalist in this pub, then Finehouse had probably taken to his heels and left the town for good.

“Who said that?” asked Titus absent-mindedly, as if he had already got used to the idea of running away.

“Algernon S. said so,” one of the seconds replied.



The Algernon S. referred to had always been Finehouse's enemy at the newspaper, forever complaining that Finehouse's name had appeared in print more often than his own.

"Algernon is a liar as per usual," exclaimed the journalist, with a beneficent burst of anger, which helped him to regain his strength of mind for the time being.

"Others have voiced the same opinion," his other second noted. "They said that Titus Finehouse would not wait for the duel, but run away from town post-haste. Unfortunately, they said, it would be in vain, because the colonel's friends, the other officers, would find him wherever he was, and cut him to pieces, as was their bounden duty."

The second who spoke thus, was a tall gentleman with a pockmarked face, a big nose and a Slovak accent. In civil life, he was a painter, but his name had figured more often in connection with duels than on pictures. Most of his time was spent in restaurants where he entertained his table companions with gruesome tales of duelling, for in one way or another he had been connected in the last twenty years with each and every duel, at least with those fought in Hungary.

The other second was a dangerous little hunchback, whose pale face and straggling black beard, eternal morning coat and tall stovepipe hat, double-barrelled pistols (two of which he constantly kept in his pocket), sword-cane, and hunting knife stuck in his waistcoat pocket, were known - as was his provocative behaviour - everywhere in town where affairs of honour were at issue.

The hunchback was a romantic figure, and, having immediately noticed Finehouse's umbrella-cane in the corner, remarked contemptuously, as befitted his character:

"With a single whack of my stick I could break this pastoral crook in two. The thing is only suitable for weak clergymen," he added, and deposited his own rattling steel-cane at a tidy distance from Finehouse's title to fame.

A shorthand teacher by profession, he had almost no time for exercising it, because his friends insisted on overwhelming him with their affairs of honour. His name was Towerpommel, and he boasted that this not at all commonplace name had been bestowed on his family by Maria Theresa herself.

Towerpommel sat himself down with his back to the wall, after casting a glance in every direction, as if desiring to establish from which side to anticipate a treacherous attack: be it the murderous assault of a drunkard, the approach of a rowdy, an unexpected insult, or a slap in the face; for this addict of the gentle art of duelling was always expecting to be beaten up somewhere or somehow. Having seated himself, he pulled out of his pocket first one and then the other of his pistols, and made sure that they were properly loaded.

"We are up against the Club now, and its long arm reaches into every corner," said the little man softly, and his eyes, the eyes of a consumptive, blazed enigmatically. "I don't presume any lack of chivalry on the part of the gentlemen themselves, but what if one of the servants, footmen, waiters, butlers or coachmen should decide all of a sudden to take vengeance for their masters' sake?... Am I not right, Benchy? Just the other day the fat editor, who had written something unsavoury about the mistress of a count, was beaten up by commissionaires near the Club."

The gentleman with the pockmarked face, called Benchy, merely nodded his assent, as he did not care to argue about bagatelles. He chose to talk of duels rather than of coachmen's brawls. And Benchy, speaking with his Slovak accent, continued the story he had begun on the way to

the pub and had, no doubt, already related to Towerpommel on many previous occasions (for they were given to spending day and night together in various taverns):

“I tell you, Steve, the wound seemed to be a fatal one, and I would not have given a brass farthing for Count Mamby’s life after Count Bimby’s bullet had gone through his liver. The liver of that loose-liver... And all the time the flies kept on biting me devilishly for there was a stable near the site of the duel... We had to look for a priest, to give Count Mamby a chance at least to die a good Catholic... Because, you know, I have always attached much importance to religion, my uncle being the dean of Rose Hill... On my word of honour, the flies kept on following me like devils...”

“Devilish flies!” said Towerpommel in acknowledgement of the fly episode which now made its first appearance in the oft-repeated tale. Never before had Mr. Benchy mentioned these flies that bit duellists and seconds alike.

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Soon afterwards the two gentlemen got ready to leave the pub, as if they had only wanted to make certain that Finehouse had not decamped. They did not belong to that fraternity of toppers who are capable of sitting around in public houses for hours on end, silently drinking and lost in reverie. They frequented pubs only as convenient places in which to carry on their daily confabs, paying no attention to what they ate or drank, because they were much too busy talking. They would, however, sit in the pub any length of time for the sake of telling adventurous stories, especially if they could somehow involve their own person in these tales.

Our gloomy journalist did not impress them as a suitable listener; he was almost rudely inattentive while Benchy was telling his story, and the little shorthand teacher, nervously twitching his bushy brows, tried in vain to arouse his interest. Titus remained absent-minded even when Benchy came to the conclusion that Count Mamby’s happy recovery was really due to his uncle, the dean of Rose Hill, of whom it was said in the Uplands that nobody ever died who had received the extreme unction from his hands.

“What is your religion, by the way?” Towerpommel had asked Titus abruptly, but not without a purpose.

“I am a Roman Catholic,” the journalist replied indifferently.

“You could have told me that earlier,” his second returned mysteriously.

Yet now that the gentlemen began to make serious preparations for leaving their absent-minded listener, the journalist exclaimed:

“Take me with you, wherever you go!”

He put his green Tyrolese hat on his head and reached for his umbrella-cane, as if trying to prove that his external appearance would be an asset in high society.

The hat and the umbrella-cane did make an impression on the seconds; they looked at each other thoughtfully, and at last Towerpommel declared:

“Well, friend, I don’t mind, you can come along. We have a date in the Orpheum Café<sup>18</sup> with some gentlemen from the country, who wish to have our advice in a certain Transdanubian affair of honour. So you will have to excuse us if we leave you alone there for a while.”

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<sup>18</sup> A well-known music-hall.

The best cab of the capital was waiting for the seconds, because seconds were wont to ride in two-horse cabs in those days, whenever they had something to settle in town. The ordinary man in the street would cross himself every time he saw this splendid cab, with the two grim gentlemen inside, flitting through the streets of the city. Meantime, the better-informed would try to guess, then and there, on what affair of honour Manuel, the cabman, was urging his horses through Váci and Crown Prince Streets, while the pockmarked painter would greet the people on one side of the street, and Towerpommel would again and again ceremoniously take off his top hat at the other window of the cab. Even when they could espy no familiar faces, they would salute just the same, for a gentleman riding in a cab must always be the first to greet.

But it was dark now and the seconds were little concerned when the humble journalist climbed briskly up onto the box and seated himself beside the cabman, so as not to inconvenience the gentlemen inside. An imperceptible tug at the reins brought the steeds to a stop, directly in front of the mysteriously illuminated night-café, while the corpulent porter, garbed like a Hussar, hurried towards them as if to greet long-expected visitors.

The air was clean and pleasantly warm, already in the lounge, and there was almost no trace of the unpleasant smell associated with inferior music-halls. Indeed, the scent of an illusive perfume hung in the air, as if a fashionable diva from the operetta had just crossed the lounge, condescendingly letting her swan's-down cloak glide from her shoulder for the edification of the minions. Beyond, the grey-bearded bandleader was playing soft, lilting melodies in the French manner, and his big beard was draped over his violin, as if the bow were drawing the tune from the beard.

A long time ago, when still a budding journalist, Finehouse had often come to this place as part of his education in the "school of life"; but ever since the Franciscan Café, with its free and easy ways, and its lack of emphasis on elegance, had opened, Finehouse had avoided the more swanky place. After all, who would want to dress day after day in a tail-coat in order to tell tall tales about all the parties he had gone to during the course of the evening? This might suit a greenhorn, but not an old hand like himself, who, moreover, would soon have to face death.

For this very reason Finehouse did not go into the main hall but sat down in the outer room, where he intended to pass the time in the company of a bottle of beer, while his friends settled their affairs inside. Out here, the music-hall actors were playing billiards, while a number of others, their hats on their heads, were seated at marble tables, as if there was more liberty here than in the world of plush and velvet, where the band was playing.

"Well, there is no denying it, I was not born a gentleman, and yet I must die like one," said Finehouse to himself, already for the second time that night, as he sat at the corner-table and thoughtfully watched the billiard game of Baumann and Gyárfás, the music-hall comedians. He could not keep out the thought that these actors would continue their jolly game even after his burial, a bullet in his heart or in his head - whichever part of his body the colonel might prefer as a target.

Soon, however, his thoughts were forced into unexpected channels, as he was greeted, in quick succession, by the following individuals:

First, a tall horse-dealer, who looked like a haughty fellow with his twirled moustache, but was cozily passing the monotonous hours of the night in jotting down the strokes of the billiard-playing comedians. Then the tall waiter, with dyed moustache, who came out of the

inner fairyland for the sole purpose of greeting Finehouse, of whose impending tragedy he had read in the newspapers.

Next in time was Caroline Turf, the flower-woman, who in days long past had been the mistress of sundry counts, but who now, with old age approaching, told the journalist: "Here's a flower for you, but I won't take any money for it!" Then came the manager of the music-hall, who looked like a lieutenant dressed up in civilian clothes, and who made a deeper bow to the journalist than he would have vouchsafed even to a millionaire. He was followed by the cloak-room attendant, who stepped forward insinuatingly, a pin between his lips and a garderobe number in his hand, ready to take Titus' outfit into the cloak-room, and yet not quite daring to touch the umbrella-cane...

Finehouse realized, while returning all these greetings, that he was sitting there with his hat on, that sowgelder's hat which thus far had never failed to make an impression wherever he showed up in it. In the huge gilt-framed mirrors he could now see the hat, with the chamois-hair at the back spread out like a fan, reflected from all sides and in countless repetitions.

"Maybe I shall yet make a hit in life," Finehouse mused, "though, come to think of it, I shall not be of this world in another twenty-four hours."

But now that Finehouse was again on the brink of despondency, fortune came to help forget his sorrow for a while. And this is how it happened: In the doorway that divided the distinguished from the common world, there appeared the powdered face of a blonde lady, and that face smiled at Finehouse as if it were set up behind the display window of a hairdresser's and flirting with the gloomy journalist through the pane. On any other occasion, Titus' face would perhaps have turned appropriately serious at the sight of this painted, expressionless doll's face, but now, on this night of nights, he raised his hand to his hat and saluted like an officer. At this the lady stepped forth in all her splendour. Now she looked like a model from the shop-window of a city tailor, on which the shop attendant had pinned a label reading "Latest Paris Fashion." She was a stupid, wicked female, whom the journalist had known in the days when the fly-by-night world had employed her as a scullery maid. She had since become the mistress of a rich cabinetmaker, and, in her new role as a lady of fashion, she took a lively interest in the journalist who was to have a duel the next day with the best shot of the National Club. It was probably the tall, well-informed waiter who had told Eliza Magnate - for such was her name - the thrilling news that the death-bound journalist had installed himself in the outer room of the café, whereupon this lady of fashion had thought it worth her while to interrupt her self-display.

The lady first examined Titus' hat and umbrella from a distance before deciding to approach the journalist's table. But Finehouse, who was nothing if not noble, hastened to assist the Angel of the Orpheum in her role; he got up from his table, politely raised his green hat, and, carefully directing his steps as if he was still a pupil at that small-town dancing school of yore, he tiptoed daintily, yet not without due manliness, towards Eliza Magnate...

"May I have the pleasure of conducting you to my table? I would be delighted if you would grant me the honour," said the journalist, and it seemed to him as if somebody else were speaking in his stead, someone of whom he had no knowledge so far, who had been secretly concealed inside of him. Cornelius, for instance, the romantic poet, who had been the journalist's ideal in his youth. Or Julius, the gallant newspaperman, who - he just remembered - was nicknamed "Flippant" in journalist circles, and had been famous for his gallantry towards the ladies, although he had kept his silver exclusively in his upper waistcoat pocket, for the manifest purpose of preventing its being pilfered from his corpulent self.

“How about a glass of bubbly, *mademoiselle*?” asked Titus, when, taking the beauty idol by the arm, he had led her to his table, and swept the cigarette ash off the marble with his hat.

And soon - in the words of the old tavern song - the sparkling liquid flowed, while the lady looked on with a waxen smile, for treats like that were her nightly fare. Finehouse, however, declaimed with a swagger:

“Now, do tell me, dear Eliza Magnate, what I can do to put you into a cheerful spirit just once in your life and to make you give me a kiss?”

“First of all, Sir, will you please put your hat on, or you will catch cold,” came the clumsy reply of this supernaturally stupid Angel of the Orpheum, wrapped in swan’s-down, silver and silk, and she helped the journalist to put his hat on his head at a gay and jaunty angle. And with her languid hands, which idleness had made as white as the inside of a walnut, she turned down the rim in harmony with the fashion of those days.

By the time Mr. Towerpommel and his partner came back from the inner sanctuary of the café, the star of the Orpheum Café and the journalist seemed to have become the greatest of friends. Encouraged by Finehouse, Eliza had already smashed a flimsy champagne glass, filled to the brim, so that the charwoman had to come and clean up the mess on the floor. The genteel quality of their principal’s entertainment tremendously impressed the seconds. As Eliza Magnate’s close table companion, the journalist could be no second-rate fellow after all. It dawned on the two men that their principal must really be somebody.

“Have you settled your business?” asked Titus importantly. “I hope you are again involved in a fatal case!”

The beauty queen smiled appreciatively at the gentlemen, as if she had long ago known them for their indomitable courage and heroic demeanour.

The pockmarked painter wanted to tell one of his gallant stories, as was his custom after a few glasses of wine, but Towerpommel, the dwarf, did not give him the opportunity to speak.

“It would be more opportune to instruct our friend Finehouse on how to behave at the duel tomorrow! If only to keep him from putting us to shame!”

The outer premises had become virtually deserted in these small hours. Actors, horse-dealers, lucky-bagmen had already drifted away, having lost all hope of adventure; only Uncle Blau, the old speculator, remained sitting in the corner, waiting for some rich customer to turn up to whom he might impart his secret on stock-exchange gambling in the good old days. Patti, the card-trickster, who was said to number a hundred years, had also left, together with his wig and his pack of cards. So the agitated shorthand teacher could freely measure off the thirty steps, counting aloud as he did so, and leaning on his sword-cane:

“One, two... thirteen... twenty-three... thirty; and five steps *avance*. Now, Benchy, you give the order to fire, please,” shouted the hunchback from the other end of the room.

The pockmarked man rose from behind the wine glasses and took Finehouse by the shoulder.

“Come along, I’ll show you your place,” he announced, making Titus stand on a square of the café parquet. “Here you stay put and wait for the commands! First: ‘Attention!’ Second: ‘Ready!’ Then I count ten, and while I count you must fire your pistol, standing sideways to your opponent, so as to give him as narrow a target as possible. There now! Attention! Ready! One, two, three...”

At this moment, the crack of a pistol sundered the quiet harmony of the distant music. The shorthand teacher, standing at the other end of the café, had actually pulled the trigger. A lamp rattled to its death.

“We want to make this young fellow get used to the report of a gun!” remarked Towerpommel, on recovering his wits, for he had turned pale at the sound of the shot. But little harm had been done, after all. As the journalist returned to his place, Eliza Magnate stroked his hand. But when the head waiter, at last, arrived with the bill on a silver tray, the cunning expression of a highwayman on his face, our hero suddenly realized that he would be left, after paying the bill, with barely enough money to pay the janitor for opening the house door, and even that only if he could, somehow, manage to cheat the waiter out of part of his tip. Eliza drifted away towards the washroom. The two seconds got into their cab and shouted to the journalist through the window:

“See you at half past four tomorrow afternoon, Francis Joseph barracks!”

Cheered up as he was by the champagne, Finehouse still could not realize the dreadful situation he had got himself into. Walking slowly along Andrassy Street, he was hopefully searching his pockets for some hidden coins which he was in the habit of concealing even from himself. He was sure that he would come across the five-crown piece which he must have put there out of his advance. This habit had developed from the circumstance that sometimes in the office the hilarious journalists would tackle one of their company in order to hunt through his pockets... “Such is Bohemian life!” they would declare at times as they stripped Titus to the skin. Now, however, his search proved to be in vain, and even if Titus had any money left in some secret spot, he must have hidden it from himself so well that it would be found only after his death by whoever would sell his trousers; while this unknown someone was bargaining with the old-clothes-man, the silver crown would come rolling out of some pocket. So he turned his steps hastily towards the Franciscan Café, where he still hoped to find a big company, discussing his life and death at the sacrifice of a night’s repose.

To his great surprise, however, the Franciscan Café was empty, and there were no journalists even at the round table by the cash-desk, where they usually sat arrogantly in the consciousness of their own importance or humbly in the shade of their penury. Only Olga was there in her place, weary, melancholy, hopeless, as always at the break of dawn, after another night devoid of events worth mentioning. Thoroughly sober now, the journalist went up to the cashier’s throne and addressed her thus:

“Olga, my darling, the last day has come, the last on which you can still decide whether you want to marry me.”

Olga, no doubt, had already heard this from Finehouse on numerous occasions, because she did not betray the least surprise on hearing the journalist’s words. Only her eyes turned more melancholy, and the needle-work trembled a little in her hands.

“Olga, dearest,” continued Titus with a burst of enthusiasm, as if this flowery speech from which he himself seemed to derive amusement, would help him to forget both the money he had squandered during the night and his penniless present. “Olga, my sweet, I would die with a peaceful mind, if I knew my name would survive me, even though it merely belonged to a widow. Mrs. Titus Finehouse, widow of Titus Finehouse! Doesn’t sound at all bad, does it, Olga?”

“Widow of Titus Finehouse,” said Olga, and, taking a pencil, she wrote on the margin of the cash-sheet: “Mrs. Titus Finehouse, widow,” and drew a circle around the name, as if she

wanted to inscribe it in her memory for ever. Like all men who rarely have an opportunity to talk about themselves, Titus enthusiastically declaimed:

“There won’t be as much as a cat left behind me... My name will be mentioned for one or two days in the newspapers, but after that nobody will ever utter it again in this country. Not even by accident. But if I left a widow, the widow of Titus Finehouse in this world, who would maybe sometimes even visit my grave, I would rest much more easily down there in my coffin. And people would say, well, this Finehouse was not such a bad fellow, after all, seeing that before dying he honourably carried out his obligation to keep the promise he so frequently made to the cashier of the Franciscan Café. My name would be surrounded by a nimbus of sorts, and people would know that I did not live light-mindedly, from one moment to the other, but had a purpose in life which I fulfilled.”

These sentimental words had their effect, for Olga now reached with one hand for the brandy bottle, while with the other she let a small glass sparkle against the light to convince herself that it was clean.

“This, I believe, is the Easter brandy drunk by pious Jews. The boss never drinks any other.”

Finehouse gulped the brandy down with a tired, leave-taking smile. The brandy livened him up, and he would have liked to talk some more. But Olga put on a solemn face and sent him home, before he could be carried away by a new fit of sentimentality:

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow,” she said.

“Do you think so?” Titus asked in a voice hoarse from the brandy.

“I have a feeling we shall,” replied Olga. And she gave Finehouse her hand.

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Were the green Tyrolese hat and the umbrella-cane surprised at the sight of Titus’ lodgings, when they arrived there after a lengthy walk?

Finehouse would usually throw himself on his bed, as if he had returned from the other world at daybreak, to become a small child again, lying, doubled up like an embryo, under the black-bordered obituary above the sleeper’s head. This obituary - or funeral notice as it was called in those days - contained the information that Mrs. Robert Finehouse had died at the age of thirty-two, after a prolonged and painful illness. Mrs. Robert Finehouse was Titus’ mother, and the obituary was his only possession. Not much of a fortune, but quite enough for such a sentimental fellow.

Shall we describe Finehouse’s room? It was about as big as a hazelnut, with a little hole in it, but the keyhole through which one could peep in, was always stopped up with a rag. And outside there was a notice, which constantly flapped in the draught passing through the corridor of this ancient downtown house. “Coming in a minute!” the notice read, but the lodger never did come.

Now too, the drowsing journalist was visited by many people in succession. There was first the little cobbler’s boy, with a tiny note in his hand that looked as dirty as if the boy had come into the world with it. He stood before the door in amazement, as though seeing it with its odd notice for the first time; then he gazed vacantly at the courtyard and finally left to join the procession which was following a blind singer from house to house. The journalist knew the steps of the tailor, who, for years, was wont to visit him like a lovelorn admirer and, if he managed to slip in through the door, would always begin the conversation by assuring the journalist that he only happened to be there accidentally, because he really did not want to

disturb Mr. Finehouse for such a trifle. Now Titus could distinctly hear him sigh as he crouched by the keyhole and whispered endearingly:

“I only wanted to see you for a moment, my dear sir. To wish you luck, that’s all. Just to set my mind at rest and convince myself that sooner or later you would pay what you owe me. Please, let me in, sir, I swear I did not even bring a bill with me.”

But Titus only hid himself deeper under the counterpane, and even the slyest words could not move him. After all, he had put a notice on his door saying that he would be coming in a minute; well, let the tailor wait if he felt like it. The tailor started to leave, then turned back all of a sudden, and indignantly shouted through the keyhole:

“By God, I’ll prosecute you, if you don’t let me in straight away.”

The tailor waited, but Finehouse did not budge, although he already regretted having put that fatal notice on his door.

And Finehouse, who was a good fellow at heart, listened remorsefully to the tailor’s despondent steps moving away from his door. He did not want to hurt the good man’s feelings, but he could make no exceptions for anyone.

Soon thunderous steps were approaching up the spiral staircase that in old downtown houses connected the ground floor with the first. At the sight of this staircase, Titus had often wondered how people could carry coffins down it. And now these ill-boding, excited, aggressive steps were approaching Titus’ door, as if announcing the bearer of an official summons. They were cruel, wild steps, like the steps of the headsman approaching his victim.

The journalist knew the owner of these steps: it was Mr. Munk, the instalment agent, a veritable curmudgeon with his customers. Mr. Munk was a thick-set, square-built, red-headed fellow, whose aim in life had been to force all the inhabitants of the capital to pay him instalments. Mr. Munk laughed ironically at the notice on the door:

“Very well, Mr. Editor,” he said, “very well!”

And he could be heard gnashing his teeth, while he wiped the sweat off his forehead with a big, white linen handkerchief.

“Scandalous!” he kept repeating. Getting hold of a chair from somewhere, he settled down comfortably in front of the door.

The journalist tried to guess which of his enemies could have given a chair to Mr. Munk. The porter perhaps... or was it the midwife, living in the neighbourhood, who could not hope to get anything out of Titus? “People are wicked and malicious,” Titus told himself, lying there dejectedly under the obituary, as if it was his own funeral notice. He was not up to having a fight with Mr. Munk; he felt helpless and this sensation was almost pleasant, because he did not have to make a single move, just like a dangerously ill patient, who had already resigned himself to his fate and at best hoped for a miracle. But even miracles would not help against Mr. Munk. He had settled down in front of the door, and Titus could hear him wheezing, hawking and belching as if, while waiting, he were practising how to be more loathsome. There was the rustling of a newspaper in Mr. Munk’s hands, the swish of pages being turned over in a notebook, the grating of a pencil, as he rounded off his notes. Life has a way of facing one with such ghastly minutes, in which one cannot get rid of some oppressive burden that has rolled on one’s heart. Mr. Munk was a very great burden.



The journalist lay in his bed almost tortured to death; he dared not budge, for thus he could still hope that Mr. Munk would at best believe him asleep and not begin to speak in that horrible, aggressive, unbearable voice he used to dun his debtors to the other world.

At this moment our hero would rather have faced the colonel's pistols than to be under Mr. Munk's guard. Pistols were fired in a second's time (hadn't he heard it himself the night before, in the café?), but Mr. Munk might sit before his door for hours. And he wasn't bored at all, as one might have thought. He began to cough. First, like a man from town, quietly and discretely; then like a man from the country, who sought pleasure even in coughing. Then he scratched himself. He scratched his palms, he scratched his head; he dug around in his ears with a match, gurgling blissfully during the operation; he rubbed his legs against each other. There are people who are never bored, because they always find something to occupy their bodies. And so Mr. Munk, when he could think of nothing better to amuse himself with, kicked his shoes off his feet and sat about in his stockings.

Fortunately, there are events that shake even the most vigilant watchman. The sounding of the bell in a nearby church was just such an event. The midday bell, which awakes special thoughts in every mortal, even if that mortal is called Munk. At first, Mr. Munk started to curse quietly, then he swore ever louder, beating the door first with his fists, then with his feet, without let-up, as if determined at all costs to make a scandal on the journalist's "last day." But Finehouse was already breathing more lightly, for he could now calculate how long Mr. Munk would be able to carry on the siege. True, Mr. Munk was a good hand at banging, having had considerable practice in this field. On the other hand, Titus too had, during his long hours of suffering, inured himself to the final assault, and it would have been foolish to surrender now, when the end of the battle was already in sight. By the time Mr. Munk, outside, had reached the state of bellowing his curses, Finehouse, inside, was already sitting on the edge of his bed, knowing full well that Mr. Munk would become deaf from his own swearing and finally desist.

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Having lost the battle, Mr. Munk departed, stopping again and again on the staircase, as if still up to some mischief, but at last the sound of his steps died away, like a memory that becomes pleasurable after the event. Having got rid of Mr. Munk, Finehouse now looked at his hat and umbrella-cane by daylight. They were imposing even in the daytime, although they had looked more impressive at night. Now one could see some wear and tear on them, for they had been lying about in the cloakroom of the café for a long time. The journalist found comfort in the thought that brand-new things never had as much value as used ones: lords and nobles always had their new shoes broken in by their valets. He was still lost in admiring his acquisitions, when he unexpectedly felt a pressure around his heart and almost fell back on the bed. All of a sudden, he remembered the duel in the afternoon, the duel he had not had the time to think of because of his visitors. In the face of other troubles, we sometimes forget even death.

"It would be much better if I could only cry," Finehouse muttered, sitting down on a chair whenever he felt the saving tears approaching. But they did not want to come. Only women are lucky enough to be able to cry whenever they want to. No, Finehouse's tears would not trickle from his eyes, however much he waited for them. He had to dress from top to toe, and he had to go out into the wide world, without the relief offered by weeping.

Still, he was lucky, because on entering the newspaper office he found the editor-in-chief there, who was known for his inability to refuse any request; it was as if his vanity or some caprice made him want to prove again and again that he did not give a fig for money, although

the lawyers were issuing warrants for the seizure of his furniture almost every week. Finehouse had a stroke of genius and candidly confessed to his chief that he had spent the advance received on the previous day to the last farthing and did not even have enough money to pay for his lunch. His manoeuvre came off - or did the hat and the umbrella-cane also have a share in its success? The editor-in-chief liked his correspondents to hold their own also on the "field of honour," so he handed Finehouse ten crowns, and the journalist could now look forward to the events of the afternoon in much higher spirits. He visited three taverns in succession, until he found one where he was served boiled beef, his favourite dish. Fortune seemed to be favouring him, because the meat was of a kind to arouse the envy of his neighbours. This, by the way, is a dish that is noticed even by the most indifferent people when the waiter passes their table with it. They scrutinize it, estimate its value and envy the guest for whom it is destined; they all but taste it. The journalist's portion was large. It had originally been put aside for the proprietor's lunch, but he renounced it for the sake of the unknown customer with the Tyrolese hat and umbrella-cane. And Titus ordered two helpings of the sauce, out of gratitude. Horseradish sauce, at that.

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It was after he had eaten the lucky boiled beef that Finehouse's fate changed to such a degree that he is probably still living somewhere or other, if he has not died in the meantime. The colonel's bullet missed him. On the other hand, Finehouse's bullet hit the colonel, very much so, and the colonel died in consequence of his wounds, as befits a brave soldier. The cab in which Titus returned from the site of the duel, was paid for by the office attendant of the newspaper. Nor did Titus make a fuss about it.

1930

## FERENC MOLNÁR

(1878-1955)

“I was born on January 12, 1878, in Budapest,” Ferenc Molnár writes in his autobiography. “There followed an intermission of five years, after which I spent sixteen years going to various schools in quick succession. The better part of the time - eight years - was spent in the Calvinist secondary school, and the lesser in Budapest University, whence I was crowded out and forced to repair to the Café Central to pursue my law studies.”

Like so many other Hungarian authors and poets, Molnár began his career as a journalist. He was still a young man when his first short stories and novels appeared. His themes were Budapest capitalism and the clashing emotions of the poor and the newly rich. His short story *Széntolvajok* (Coal Thieves) is a fascinating sketch of the cause of poor people driven by poverty to thieving.

Already prior to the First World War, he scored great successes with his witty plays, in which he utilizes all the ‘tricks’ of the stage and combines them with high literary workmanship and poesy. *Liliom*, *A testőr* (The Guardsman), and his other plays - *Olympia*, *Harmónia* (Harmony), *Csoda a hegyek között* (Miracle in the Mountains), *Az ördög* (The Devil), etc. - established him as a celebrated playwright. His name soon became well known the world over - his comedies, which are built up with ingenuity and the experience of an old hand in the world of the theatre, were acclaimed in Paris, Vienna and New York, and his films were highly appreciated in all of Europe and America. His novel *A gőzoszlop* (Column of Steam) as well as several other creations forming a part of his vast lifework, are important assets of Hungarian prose-writing.

His fiction is less known than his plays; the only exception perhaps being *A Pál utcai fiúk* (The Pál Street Boys), a book for young people, a fine, emotionally-coloured story of Budapest boys, which has been a world success. Yet his early short stories and novels include works of significance: their realism, pithiness and the excellent sense of form apparent in them still stimulate the readers’ interest.

## COAL THIEVES

A golden morning-mist lay over the Danube. Below, near the water's surface, its colour seemed of a dense and milky hue. Higher up, above the Tower of Buda, the sunbeams seemed to have melted into the fog.

It was a golden haze, a cold, rare golden vapour, such as drunken alchemists must at one time have dreamed of. On the banks, the trees stretched up into the mist, clambering into its golden vapour and bathing their few remaining russet leaves - tatters of their former foliage - in it.

Everything appeared to melt into this autumnal haze: it was like some old and blurred pastel landscape. A large smudge was advancing, slowly, dreamily along the embankment. Suddenly, there was a cry, but the sound was cozy and muffled, as though uttered in a room. The large smudge fought its way through the fog, and, after much exertion, emerged from it. It now turned out to be a cart laden with coal. Three merry lads were sitting on the driver's seat - imitation-miners, sooty-faced city coal-heavers. They presented a comical sight, against the background of that huge mass of coal. How far removed they were from the choke-damp, the black sweat, the white horror of the shafts and pits. Their coal was a tamed, lifeless mineral, a black mass that threatened nobody.

Two old, decrepit horses were harnessed to the cart: their ancestors had once galloped and trampled freely through the wilds and here they were tugging a coal cart. Like them, the coal also appeared to be harnessed to this cart: a poor old, crumbling mineral, fit only to be flung about and split and to be exploited as an inorganic domestic animal.

And the three merry imitation-miners were masters of both beast and coal. They were a funny sight, resembling colliers no more than a butcher's boy resembles a cowherd, who at least tends the cattle in a live state rather than in the form of meat.

"Hurrah! Off we go!" one of them shouted.

"Whoa!" the other cried lustily, climbing onto the top of the coal-heap.

"Chuck it down there," said the third.

"Where the bush is."

The one who had spoken first, expectorated and prudently said:

"Only into the bush."

There was a thud. The man standing a-top the coal-heap had thrown a big lump from the cart. The black stone rolled over the rusty grass towards the bush, slid beneath it, and stopped.

"Come on! Let's go!" the other urged.

"There's a bush over here too."

The driver nodded his head:

"Chuck it there, only there," he said, and another lump of coal was flung into the fog. Upon striking the ground, it broke in two and set the bush rustling as it disappeared under it.

The two old horses resumed their heavy plodding, never feeling that their task was growing lighter as the load decreased. Physics is a compilation of very cold, highly immoral and even unjust theses. I well know this, otherwise I might say that the weight of the cart did not really grow lighter, for its load had decreased through immoral means.

It is a pity that we did not live a thousand years ago. For at that time nine out of every ten people would have believed that if you pinched two pounds out of a hundred, there would still be a hundred pounds left. Nowadays only one among ten will believe such a thing, namely, the coal-merchant.

So pinch they did, these fellows, and had a good laugh over it. Stealing must be great fun, a very amusing occupation, indeed! Perhaps it is just as cheering, amusing and exalting as its reverse - honest work - is dull, cheerless and bitter. After all, who indulges more lightly in pilfering than those eternal seekers after pleasure and amusement - women and children? We men know nothing about it. My great-grandchild's grandchild will be able to tell of the exultation which will follow the release of all souls from the great burden, which sacred Property now imposes upon our lives.

"Come on, let's go," the coal-thieves' merry marching song sounded from the driver's seat.

"Hoop-la!" they cried, as Mr. Kleinberger's coal flew from the cart. One after the other, the largest and bulkiest pieces sailed through the air, each of them big enough to fill half a stove.

"Come on, let's go," the thieves' march went on. "Throw it in the bush."

"Only in the bush," the deep bass chimed in. They were enjoying themselves, hugely. It must have caused them an exquisite thrill, more delightful than a game of cards, more pleasurable than drinking.

The method, by the way, was as ancient as coal itself. Throw a lot of coal out of the cart on your way there, and pick it up, piece by piece, on your way back. The coal itself would have been amused, if it were possessed of a sense of humour. Man has not changed! It took thousands of years for brown lignite to develop into bluish-black anthracite. But already at its brown stage of adolescence it was stolen, by the lake-dwellers, and it will still be stolen by generations of aviators, after it has crumbled into grey dross.

The last fat lump was flung down near the landing-stage on the river; for there the bushes came to an end. Tucsik, perched on top of the coal-heap, was almost broken-hearted to think that they could steal no more. He rather regretted that he had been so slow in throwing.

"I should have dropped one or two more," he mused, remembering two thick bushes which he had failed to pay his compliments to. Thus does a dying man look back upon his life. There are always bushes which we have passed by unheeded, and each brief quarter of an hour represents a whole lifetime, filled with omissions. Sixty years, or a quarter of an hour, - it's almost all the same; and it is also irrelevant whether one failed to steal or to give.

The porter was already waiting for them at the hotel door.

"What d'you mean by coming at this time of the day?"

"When did you think we'd come?"

"Why, early in the morning."

The cart stopped.

"Swing to the left and then round to the back," the porter shouted imperiously. "The basement window's open." Then, noticing how slow they were, he barked.

"Come on! Let's go!"

This was no longer the enthusiastic "let's go" of the thieves' march. This was the authoritative tone of duty. And it had the sombre, bleak and pressing ring of duty itself. It was not the

thieves who spoke it, but the respectable porter - and *he* would never steal *coal*, not on his life! He stole shirts, he stole towels. He had climbed a rung higher up the social ladder, so he had nothing but contempt for mere raw materials. He was a cultured thief; industrial products were what he required.

The cart was driven round to the back of the four-story building, whence there soon came the rumbling, thundering noise of coal being dumped into the cellar. It clattered down the wooden plank, one little clap of thunder following the other.

"They're bringing coal," a few late guests remarked. "Autumn has come."

The din and roar of the avalanche of coal could still be heard from the cellar.

"Winter will soon be here," said a stout old chambermaid, the sort one always has to ring for twice.

She looked out of the garret-window. The fog was lifting. Absorbing the sun's golden warmth, it began to vanish, and a glorious warm yellow light now enveloped the scene. The Danube resembled liquid opal. Peasant girls, employed as gardeners, were sweeping up the fallen leaves, with slow rocking movements. It was a beautiful calm autumn morning.

From the garret-window, the stout chambermaid caught sight of a commissionaire.

"He's coming," she said.

Descending to the first floor, she knocked on the door of Number Twenty. "Please, Ma'am, the luggage carrier's already coming with his cart."

The widow Sikoró was sitting on the sofa, surrounded by trunks and baskets.

"It's time he came, too," she said. "Do you hear that noise?"

They listened. The coal continued to roll and to crash into the cellar.

"Winter has come!"

There was a knock at the door, and a small Jewish commissionaire entered.

"Good morning, Ma'am."

Mrs. Sikoró slowly rose from the sofa. She was a very old and very sick woman. She heaved a deep sigh and said:

"Well, let's go then."

This had an even more serious ring than the porter's "let's go." This was the real thing. 'Let's go!' Let's go and die, let's go to the peaceful churchyard and join the other old ladies there. Mrs. Sikoró no longer stole anything. Perhaps that was why she felt so sad. Nobody and nothing was willing to be stolen by her.

The commissionaire was a small ruddy-cheeked man, A golden watch-chain dangled from his waistcoat. It was easy to see that he was a man of some consequence. He was indeed about to give up his present trade for a small-scale forwarding business. These small hauls with his pushcart were, so to say, the closing strains of his career as a commissionaire. He would now become the owner of a forwarding firm, advancing from the status of wealthiest commissionaire to that of shabbiest forwarding agent.

Within ten minutes, he had placed all Mrs. Sikoró's belongings on the cart, neatly fastening them with string. All the while he conversed in a medley of German and Hungarian, his voice

sounding as if he were choking. Then he pushed his red cap back from his forehead and shouted:

“Joseph!”

At this, a man turned up from behind the building. He served as the commissioner’s draught-animal. His face was dull and of a mouldy colour - the small, pallid caricature of a soulless animal - with an irregular growth of hair above his upper lip. The poor man looked as if he weren’t really as ugly and mouldy as all that but had merely gazed at himself in a cheap, blistered mirror, and had henceforth continued to wear the countenance he had seen reflected in it.

Baggy trousers hung loosely about his legs, while the sleeves of his coat reached right down to his finger-tips. Some stout gentleman must have performed the most repulsive of all charitable acts by presenting him with his cast-off clothing. This thin green-faced Joseph now harnessed himself to the small cart and set to work.

Slowly and painfully he hauled the laden cart; while the little red-faced commissioner took hold of Mrs. Sikoró’s wheel chair and briskly propelled his light burden in Joseph’s wake. He soon overtook the latter and slackened his speed. Slowly the rare procession advanced; the wheel chair at the head, then the commissioner, followed by Joseph, with the overloaded cart bringing up the rear.

When they reached the road, where the coal cart had passed a short while before, the commissioner greeted the policeman standing there. A commissioner always greets a policeman. A commissioner greets everybody, for in his line of business it is vitally important to maintain a wide circle of acquaintances, which cannot be done without attending their parties or bowing to them frequently - to the point of annoyance. Mr. Eislitzer chose the latter expedient.

As they jogged along with the creaking little cart, the mouldy-faced little man suddenly stood still. He threw up his head, and stood there like a pointing dog.

“Mr. Eislitzer,” he said softly.

The commissioner stopped too, and the whole procession came to a halt. Have you ever watched a man carrying a load? As he staggers along, his breast fills with hatred towards his work. But on and on he carries his load. When at last his hatred has accumulated to the bursting point, then let there be some sound, some strange gesture, anything to startle him, and he will stop dead. Fatigue and disgust are not sufficient to halt him. There has to be a sudden burst, like an electric spark.

They started muttering in subdued voices.

“Mr. Eislitzer,” repeated he of the mouldy face.

“What is it?”

“There’s coal here.”

“What d’you mean, ‘coal?’”

“Fine coal, I tell you. Saw it as we were coming along here. Thought at first it was just by accident. But then there was another lump further on, and then another and another. Pinching the coal, that’s what they’re doing, the coal gang. See?”

“I see,” said Mr. Eislitzer.

And a moment later, they had left everything, wheel chair and all, standing in the middle of the white road. The cart, with its shaft turned to one side, towards the embankment, appeared to be watching them. The two men, meanwhile, had scrambled down the slope and were rummaging about among the weeds, in the bushes, and at the water's edge.

They were conversing in a mysterious manner.

"Hallo," said the human beast of burden, "look at that wopper!"

"But this is theft all right," said Mr. Eislitzer.

Stooping unceasingly, the two men picked up the lumps of coal, hiding them under their arms.

A curious pair of animals they were, two stunted urban creatures grazing coal.

Mr. Eislitzer was holding a fine, large, shiny piece of coal in his hand. He looked at it lovingly, and tried to guess its weight.

"This one alone weighs at least ten pounds."

"Here's some more," the other whispered greedily. "I'll pick that up too."

Mr. Eislitzer surveyed the scene.

"Incredible," he said and added: "There's some more."

When they had picked up as much as they could carry, the beast of burden turned towards Mr. Eislitzer, and said with a grin:

"They hid it here, and now we're taking it away."

"Taking it away!" exclaimed the commissionaire. "Why should we? What makes you think we're going to take it away? Whom d'you suppose we are? Maybe, you think we're going to take it, but why should we?"

"Sure enough," said the other.

For a while, they stared at each other in consternation, as they both had their hands filled with lumps of coal. At last, Mr. Eislitzer recovered his speech.

"Let's load it onto the cart."

They loaded the cart, whereupon the procession resumed its march. From afar, where the hotel was, came the mysterious rumbling noise of the coal as it rolled into the cellar.

"Won't they be surprised though, when they come back, and start searching and find it's all gone," said Joseph happily almost bending double as he dragged the cart along.

A little farther down they stopped again. From under a bush there stared at them such an immense lump that the commissionaire's heart missed a beat.

"Did you ever," he exclaimed. "Stealing lumps as big as that!" He ran down to fetch it, and brought it up, panting. It glistened in the sunshine. A fine specimen it was, beyond doubt, a solid lump of dark lustre striped here and there with yellow streaks of ore. The commissionaire added it to the rest. He shot a glance at Joseph, who was wiping his nose, with a cunning expression on his face. He was smiling beneath the sparse growth of hair that was his moustache. At this Mr. Eislitzer's face suddenly became serious.

"I shall report this to the police," declared Mr. Eislitzer, as he ran down to pick up yet another piece. From below, he shouted:



“Pick up all you can find. We’re going to report this, and the stuff’ll be restored to its rightful owner.”

Until now, he had not been particularly serious about all this reporting and restoring business. But hitherto he had lacked the moral basis for picking up the already half-stolen coal. His pronouncement had provided him both with the moral basis and the right to pick up those lumps. Get’em loaded on the cart first, among the trunks and baskets, he thought. Once they are safely there, we’ll consider the next step.

So they went on and on, occasionally stopping on the road, under the half-bare trees. The little cart was now black with coal. They tied the wheel chair to the truck, and now Mr. Eislitzer too harnessed himself to the shaft. So now the two of them were lugging the cart. They trudged mutely side by side. Joseph was wondering what would happen with the coal. The weather had turned cold. Winter was around the corner. In his mind’s eye he saw a small, spindle-legged iron stove, well stoked, giving out a fine, scorching heat. ‘How pleasant that would be,’ he thought.

Mr. Eislitzer’s thoughts were different. ‘I could sell the coal,’ he thought. ‘My household needs every penny I can get. This is clear profit. The finest coal that’s to be had.’

Suddenly a policeman showed up, coming towards them.

“Ahem,” said Mr. Eislitzer, turning red in the face, to match the colour of his cap.

He swallowed a lump in his throat. The policeman was a handsome fellow, with energetic features. Severity and superiority were written on his face.

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Eislitzer, to no purpose, “yes, yes.”

He swallowed again.

“What time is it?” he asked the little man, all the while watching the policeman out of the corner of his eye.

The policeman came nearer and nearer. The commissionaire stopped, disentangled from the harness and reverently raised his cap to the policeman.

“I’ll give’em what for, those swine,” he whispered to Joseph and ran up to the policeman.

“Could you please tell me where I can find the nearest police station?” he said. “I wish to report a theft.” The policeman was carrying his lunch wrapped up in a scarlet bundle.

“What do you want?” he asked angrily.

Mr. Eislitzer pointed towards the coal.

“What d’you say to that? Look, there, under the bushes. Do you see?”

And he related the case. The policeman placed his bundle on the ground. Then he took a look at the coal. Another policeman was now approaching from the other end of the road. It was the one whom the commissionaire had previously greeted.

“Yes,” said the second policeman, “the guard down at the landing-stage has already told me about it. He had already collected a lot when I passed by.”

“Oh, he did, did he?” thought Mr. Eislitzer.

“There’s enough fuel here for a week,” said one of the policemen.

The other one replied:

“You should have seen the quantity that’s further down the road! There’s enough coal there to go on with for a fortnight. I walked all along the embankment and saw some under every bush.”

The landing-stage guard turned up. He wore a coat with brass buttons.

“They also threw some into the water, officer,” he said panting. “Not right into it, just close to the edge, so it won’t be washed away.”

He stared at the coal on the cart, and smiled. He, too, was fond of coal.

“Bless me!” he ejaculated. “So you’ve picked it up already!”

“Pardon me,” protested Mr. Eislitzer, “we’ve just informed this officer here.”

Now they all stood there in a group: the first policeman with the red bundle; a poverty-stricken janitor, and father of six children, at a rough guess; the second policeman, with a look on his face that spoke of wanting to turn in and sleep for forty-eight hours at a stretch; then there was Mr. Eislitzer; his assistant, the poor human beast, who lived upon dry bread steeped in thin coffee and on flour mixed with warm water; the landing-stage guard, who lived on a pontoon, in a small shack with one porthole, which he heated in winter with small pieces of driftwood, fished out of the river during the summer. They stood there, a group of penniless, miserable creatures, sick from poor housing and terrible, griping penury that drives a man to his grave. They were all of them down-at-the-heels, pale-faced peasants, except for Mr. Eislitzer, who was rich, because he ate meat once every day.

“You should nab them, when they return,” said the guard. “I’ve just come from the hotel, they’d already finished unloading the coal. They must be here any moment.”

The draught-man smiled. He was glad the rascals would be arrested, but was sorry to lose that fine coal. The guard picked up a lump. “I could do with that,” he remarked with an artificial, strained laugh lest they take his words seriously; but he eyed the coal so wistfully, that Mr. Eislitzer snatched it from his hand.

“You put that back.”

“Fuel,” said the draught-man. “Good fuel. Would heat the room well, when it’s freezing outside.”

He scratched his head. He was afraid of the frost, for he knew it only too well. He was a specialist in that line, the devil take it.

The two policemen said nothing. They had acquired great practice in not coveting lost property. They had already experienced the feeling the first time a gentleman in a silk-hat had pressed into their hand a lost purse, or when they had collected the few coins from the pockets of the first dead man they had seen run over; or when they had caught their first ragged pickpocket, and removed from his clutched fist the golden watch he had just stolen. This practice, this training they had had in honesty lent their faces a sort of seriousness, which gave the impression of genuine moral dignity. That too is a skill, just like any other craft, which can be mastered. A policeman is trained to be honest, as a carpenter is trained to work with his plane. That is his job. And when he has been honest for twelve hours in succession, he grows tired, and lies down to sleep.

The draught-man was an honest fellow, for he melted into Mr. Eislitzer’s strong character.

Had Mr. Eislitzer escaped by some side-alley with the coal stolen from the thieves, he would have followed him, and would have been just as happy to get away with the theft as he was now that they had so nicely managed to report it.

Mr. Eislitzer had not stolen the coal, because he was hesitant, and he who hesitates becomes a moral being. What is hesitation? An artificial pause, which serves to leave the decision to some external event. A thief who hesitates is like a stammering liar. The latter speaks a few words to every one, in order to gain time and let something happen which would make it unnecessary for him to finish his lie. Such stammering, such hesitation represents the struggle of the body, of matter, against the principles which in general govern its actions.

Finally, the landing-stage guard's reason for not stealing the coal was simply that none of the others had stolen it, and, having been caught up in the drift of events, he now found himself one of this honest and law-abiding company.

Suddenly, the draught-man gave out an exultant yell, pointing towards something in the distance:

"There they come!"

And, indeed, the coal-store miners were approaching. The horses now jogged along at a brisk trot. Only the driver was now sitting in front; the other two coal-heavers were standing up in the cart, looking mighty grim. They had already sensed that trouble lay ahead. Somebody had picked up the coal, and now they had but the one desire, to flee.

On seeing the group, the driver pulled the reins, and the cart slowed down to a walking pace. Nothing could have better expressed the mess in which the once so merry black-faced fellows found themselves. The group moved to the middle of the road.

"Hey," shouted Mr. Eislitzer, who headed the party. "Would you mind stopping for a moment."

The guard advanced and caught the reins of one of the horses close to the animal's mouth.

"What d'you want?" the driver asked suspiciously.

He knew only too well, poor chap, what they wanted.

The policemen pushed Mr. Eislitzer aside; the coalmen dismounted from the cart. Official proceedings followed; the names and addresses of the witnesses were taken. Then the empty coal-cart left the group and was driven away by a downhearted driver.

He had a licence, so they could get him again the next day. The two merry fellows remained in the policemen's charge.

Then the procession got under way again. The policemen in front, two wretched, hungry, sleepy policemen, with the two grimy men, who shared a tattered mat for their daily three hours of sleep. There followed Mr. Eislitzer, with the bath chair; next to him came the landing-stage guard, who still cast loving glances at the coal. All these were the witnesses. They too were going to the police-station. They would teach these rascals a lesson! Lastly there came Mouldy-Face with Mrs. Sikoró's belongings: he was smiling with a "serves them right" expression all over his face, but with a touch of pride added, since he was one of the witnesses. He, too, was going to teach them.

Walking in the sunshine of that lovely warm October day, these poor, downtrodden people, were taking one another to prison, on account of a few lumps of coal from the stores of Kleinberger and Co. They might have been thieves, each of them, and yet they were honest;

each could have been accused or accuser, witness, denunciator, or thief of thieves; none of them was in the right, yet each had right on his side. There was no difference between them, save that one had a face the colour of mould while the other's face was smeared with coal-dust; that one was wearing a round shako with a white pompon on it and had been trained to honesty, another wore a gold braided sailor's cap and had too much self-control, while a third had a red cap and a weak will. Yet they were taking one another to the police-station, for the simple reason that they were all in a group, because they were held together by all the dastardly lies which for thousands of years had been drummed into their heads by the rich. So they went on their way, following one another, because the rich had set them against one another, these poor, miserable, hungry, sleepy, shivering, sick people. They went, because some had had a sword hung on their sides, and another a red cap thrust on his head, by the well-to-do: and they had been taught to keep an eye on each other, these poor, ragged, liveried masqueraders. They went along, solemnly, earnestly: the world never saw a sight more pitiful, more sickening, more revolting and more heart-rending than this procession.

But nobody saw them, except the widow Sikoró, who rode alongside them in a wheel chair. But Mrs. Sikoró did not have an inkling of what was going on, for all the time she was absorbed in thoughts of death, of the beautiful cemetery where the other tired old ladies had already been laid to rest.

1918

## FERENC MÓRA

(1879-1934)

Son of an impecunious village fur-mender and of a woman baker, Ferenc Móra owed his university education to a fortunate accident combined with a keen desire to study. He became a schoolmaster, then a journalist; in 1904, he joined the staff of the Szeged Municipal Library and, like István Tömörkény, was eventually appointed director of the local Museum. He conducted excavations and became deeply interested in archaeological studies. He lived a rather monotonous life in Szeged, contributing short stories and other features to various newspapers in Budapest and the provinces. Several of his novels met with extraordinary success. *Aranykoporsó* (The Golden Coffin) draws a vivid image of the conflict-torn Roman Empire in the period of decline, as seen in the mirror of an idyllic love-story; *Ének a búzamezőkről* (Song of the Wheatfields) is a hymn to the beauty of rustic labour; *Négy apának egy leánya* (Daughter of Four Fathers) is a thrilling novel of manners. His novels for children - *Dióbél királyfi* (Prince Walnut-meat), *A kincskereső kisködmön* (Treasure-hunting Little Smock-frock), and *Csalavári Csalavér* - are masterpieces of charming humour and human kindness and are still counted among the most popular books ever written for young Hungarians.

“I Believe in Man” is the title of one of his short stories, and it about sums up his literary programme - a sturdy, optimistic faith in mankind. He has mostly written of down-and-out men and women, amidst whose daily cares and unceasing hardships the triple flower of Charity, Solidarity and creative Labour blossoms. He shows much sympathy and understanding for the world of children and either tells experiences of his own childhood, shaping them with artistic talent, or relates touching stories of peasant lads from the Szeged district. His main asset is a profound humour - he smiles at human frailty, so as to force back his tears. Móra stands at the crossroads between conventional and modern art, his harmonious outlook and optimism link him with conservative Hungarian fiction, but the rebellious kernel of his themes already reflects the modern world.

This outlook pervades his short story *Szeptemberi emlék* (A September Reminiscence), in which he treats a childhood grief with so much warmth of heart and intimacy of feeling that the memory of that distant past becomes beautiful, its bitterness mellowed.

## A SEPTEMBER REMINISCENCE

That summer was just like this one, the wheat abounding in ears, the grapes thick with clusters. You could not have put more apples on the trees nor more grapes on the vine-stocks.

“Now, my son, there’ll be new books, and a new suit at vintage-time,” said my father, patting me on the back. “There will be indeed. Even a vest with golden buttons, plated with silver and gilded with gold.”

A sense of shame, which had been haunting me for a year, now brought a flush to my cheeks. As a first-year grammar school boy, I had had the ardent wish to dress as finely for Whitsun as the children of the Strosses, our neighbours. It was easy for them, of course, for their father owned a clothes shop and they could dress like any prince they fancied. (Yellow trousers, red waistcoat and green hat with feather-grass.) But I had to look after my finery myself. Luckily I had not to search far. Seven houses away, on the other side of the street, lived Mr. Raven, the coffin-maker, who used to dry the newly painted coffins in the courtyard. I stole the gilded paper-letters from the coffins and sewed them left and right on the front of my jacket. It was very beautiful indeed, and God had certainly more pleasure in me than in any emperor whose chest is a whole Milky Way of orders. But grown-up people seldom have the same taste for beauty as children. My mother made me take off the orders and shook her head apprehensively.

“What will become of you, my son, if you still do such things in your first year of grammar-school? Will you never come to your senses?”

Well, in the second class I *did* come to my senses. I read through the entire Holy Bible, the Old and New Testaments, the Song of Songs, the Apocalypse, and those many Jewish kings had an extraordinarily sobering effect on me. Whenever I had a quarrel with Olga Stross on account of some cheese tart, I would call her Jezabel and tell her if I were to marry her, I would have the hounds lap up her blood. (I had seen this scene on a beautiful woodcut in the Bible.) In Crane Street, I was considered a sage and my merits were acknowledged even officially. At the distribution of the terminal reports I got a purse of twenty florins, the highest in the school, and I was just counting them on the table when my father good-humouredly recalled that sinister spot in my past, the coffin-affair.

“Don’t listen to him, son,” my mother said, looking in from the kitchen. “Your father is only making fun. I’ll tell you something else. Out of this little sum of yours we shall give ten florins to your father, so he can pay last year’s taxes. The other ten you will lend me, and we shall have a walnut cross made for the grave of your grandparents, and we’ll buy two piglets besides. In the summer you’ll graze them in the vineyard, by vintage-time they’ll have grown up, and one of them we’ll sell at the autumn fair and buy your third-term books with the money. Will that do?”

Of course it would do! My father knew as little about money as myself, and so my mother had charge of the financial empire. This was the first and last well-founded budget in my whole life. We couldn’t be blamed if it didn’t get the approval of the Heavenly Authorities.

On the afternoon of St. Stephen’s Day<sup>19</sup> a hail-storm struck down the grapes, worse yet, it split the very vine-stocks. Next morning one could still gather hailstones by the handful on the flat

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<sup>19</sup> 20th August.

places where the water had swept them together. This St. Stephen's Day became a historical date in our family ever since. It is our *ab urbe condita*, and we count everything from then.

The sling-stones from Heaven did for the two piglets too. Had my father been some Roman Emperor, the astrologers would surely have assigned them a place to graze somewhere near the polar star, where the other stellar animals are to be found. But as it was, we only buried them at the foot of the lilac shrub. I too assisted and was most astonished to see my father raise the back of his hand to his eyes. I had never before seen a grown-up cry. Especially not in our family. The tears of our kind usually flow inwards as I have since learned.

Only now did I guess that there must be some great misfortune. But not until the 1st of September, "the day of the white hands," did I learn what it was.

My mother took me to school for registration. Mothers become lionesses when their child is clutching at their skirts. They have no fear even of the high and mighty.

Mr. Zólyomi, the teacher on duty, was by no means a man to be afraid of. He was a gentle soul, as sweet as honey-cake, and as far as I know, still remained so, at the sunset of his life. He even offered my mother a seat when he saw that my second-form school-reports contained nothing but "very good" marks.

"Well, mother, you must find great pleasure in this little bag of tricks," the teacher said, patting my fear-blanching face with the ruler.

To judge by her age, my mother might have been the teacher's daughter. But gossamer-threads spun by the spiders of care had already got caught in her hair when she was but twenty-five. Our kind never took it amiss if somebody thought us older than we were. Pride and not wounded vanity made my mother's ever sorrowful face turn the colour of peach blossoms. She looked at me with sudden emotion, but instantly pulled herself together. From her bosom she drew her coloured kerchief.

"Please, what do I owe, Mr. Teacher?" and she undid a corner of the kerchief.

"Six florins and fifty-three farthings, my dear."

The peach blossom faded to cherry blossom.

"We have but one florin, Your Honour. The gipsy-woman didn't give me more for my silk kerchief. My husband told me that a poor child has to pay no more than one florin."

"All right, my dear, but in that case you must bring me a Certificate of Poverty," and Mr. Zólyomi, turning grave, looked at the sheet filled with columns. Should he scratch out what he had entered? Oh, how much trouble these stupid women made!

My mother clasped her veined, bark-like hands.

"Your Honour, we are poor even without a Certificate, please, believe us."

Mr. Zólyomi suddenly averted his eyes and lowered his head.

"I see that, my good woman, and I believe it, but then I can't disregard the law either, you'll have to bring a document from the town hall."

The town hall was but a stone's throw from the school, yet very, very far. How should a bare-footed, or, at best, slippered woman find her way in there? True, she knows Dobos, the night watchman, who used to deliver the tax due-bills, but he is deaf; and Mr. Csajka, the bailiff, but he again is rude.

Well, the bells were ringing noon, when, at last, we were shoved onto the scene of action. Only by that time we found the door closed. The clerk had gone over to the Crown for some beer.

Now, what should we do? Never in her life had my mother been in a pub, nor did she know the clerk. So we sat down on the doorstep and demurely awaited him. The horse-relayer asked us what we were about and then told us that the clerk was lame and that we should address ourselves to him. In the morning he was lame on one leg only, but after beer-drinking he was lame on both, so we should easily recognize him.

We did indeed recognize him. It was at about two o'clock. First he was in a very good humour. He insisted on giving my mother a kiss, but when he staggered against the curb-stone, he at once became angry.

"What the deuce do you want here, at this hour of the day? And anyway, as far as I know, you've got a vineyard, too."

"We have, two strips of land. One strip is entirely bare."

Now the limping man was already roaring:

"Well, that's the limit! So they want a Certificate of Poverty! The scoundrels! The swindlers!"

He was already stumbling along at the other side of the market place, but we still could hear his swearing. The town hall guard saluted him stiffly, then bored his eyes into us.

"Move on, move on, woman, while the going's good!"

We got a little scared, but at the corner of the town hall we recovered our wits. My mother was a woman with a strong will.

"I won't leave it at this, my darling. Let's go to Bajáki, the teacher's, he has always been good to us."

Mr. Bajáki had taught me the alphabet, and he used to visit me at vintage-time to see how much I had grown. He was a very kind-hearted man, but now even he couldn't help us.

"My dear, whoever owns *landed property*, has no right to a Certificate of Poverty." I had not realized, till then, that we were landed proprietors.

Our property, by the way, could be covered by ten somersaults, while the tenth would land us on the neighbour's ground. Luckily, it was sheer bottomless sand. Had it been of loamy soil, capable of becoming mud, we should have long since carried away the whole "property" on our feet.

The teacher advised us that the best thing would be for my father to try to speak with those gentlemen of the magistracy to whose homes my grandfather long ago had had free entrance. For my grandfather was once the finest tobacco-cutter in town and so a rather famous man in his time. (I record this fact for the benefit of my future biographers. They should know that celebrity in our family did not begin with me.) Every local official had his tobacco cut by my grandfather, knowing that not a pipeful of it would stick to the hands of the old shepherd.

No doubt, the Cumanian<sup>20</sup> gentlemen at the town hall recalled my grandfather with kind feelings when next day my father shamefacedly slunk in. But only the town clerk deigned to speak to him, and all he would say was:

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<sup>20</sup> Native of the Kiskun region.



“You see, Martin, you should have given fewer cheers for Lajos Kossuth. Then you would not be such a *marked man* now.”

The councillor of the tax department, himself a partisan of the spirit of 1848<sup>21</sup>, at least gave this advice: “Look here! This very month a commission will visit the vineyards to estimate the damage by the hail. Maybe they’ll give you something in writing about the how’s and why’s. You’ll have to submit this paper to the council, together with a petition. After all, exemption from school fees can be granted, it only needs a bit of goodwill. But don’t for all the world tell anybody that this was my advice, for as it is, I am always being accused of stirring up the people.”

My father did not take me with him into the town hall, but left me at the gate. I amused myself reading the announcements posted on it. A price of a hundred florins was set on the head of some highwayman. The head of that outlaw was worth a hundred florins to my native country. But my untarnished little life was not even worth six florins and fifty-three farthings to anybody. This I learned when my father came down and without a word took my hand. He did not speak till we reached the bootmaker’s stall on the market place. Softly and gently he asked me:

“Do you see, how fine those fine boots are?”

“I do,” and my heart gave a big throb. For I already knew what the next question would be.

“What would you say if I were to bind you as an apprentice to a bootmaker?”

I could not say a word. I only shook my head. How could I then have understood the way of the world? How could I have foreseen all the careers that would be open to bootmakers by the time I was grown up? I only knew that bootmaker’s apprentices were dirty, that they worked with pitch and that when I met them, they would push me into the ditch. Had I but grasped then that the world belongs to those who can keep on pushing!

Afterwards a great council was held at home. We took stock of the settee, the looking-glass, the coverlet, *every object of luxury* which could be converted into money, so that one florin might become six and a half. We considered even the cradle of my two-year-old sister; she was already a big girl and we might as well make her bed in the nook. But all that was too little. Even if it covered the school fee, what would be left for the books? We also went through the list of our sundry relations, but they, too, were all ruined by the hail - how could the blind help the sightless?

That night I had a very bad dream. I got stuck in a pitch cauldron, the bootmaker’s apprentices tied my toes with pitched thread and dragged me through the street to the market place. When I awoke, my eyes were swollen with the tears I had shed in my dreams.

By that time my father had already moved out to the vineyard. Whenever he had troubles which he could neither laugh nor curse away, he always hid himself there. (Ah! If only as much had been left to me of that “landed property” as a dog-hole, how often would I have hidden there myself.) My mother took me in her arms, although we were bashful people and, normally had no time for such upper-class ways. She even tried, with a large comb to give a semblance of order to my dishevelled hair.

“Don’t worry, my darling, you’re not an apprentice yet. Last night I remembered the Right Reverend Ágocs. He is kind to the poor. But, be sure to kiss his hand nicely.”

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<sup>21</sup> 1848-1849: date of the Hungarian revolution and War of Independence.

The Right Reverend Ágocs was a very good man, indeed. He was always walking around the church like a mighty, beautiful idol come to life, and he never let a woman or a child pass without extending his hand to be kissed. He knew the whole town by name, and he immediately called my mother by name, when she shoved his fat, beringed hand towards us.

“God bless you, my good woman, God bless you, dear Mrs. Móra! Well, how do you do, how are things down in Crane Street? Is there to be a baptism, or has someone died?”

His big sunflower-face smiled, but the smile faded when my mother finished her jeremiad about our troubles. The honest man froze into a stone idol.

“Why all the fuss? What are you wailing for? Where is it written that everybody must make a gentleman of his child? You could bind your boy as an apprentice, couldn’t you? Now, God be with you!”

But a good man cannot quite deny himself. Even though we had made him angry, he again, on parting, let us kiss his well scented hand.

Now it was all up with me, indeed. Even my mother asked what kind of apprentice I wanted to be? My God, what else could I have said but: bookseller. I could say it with a fairly easy heart and upon that my mother brightened up a bit too. Perhaps she was thinking of the books full of beautiful tales I should be able to read to her, seated beside the ditch of a Sunday afternoon.

At that time Mr. Ranezay was the only bookseller in our town. In his shop window there just happened to be a notice saying that he wanted to employ an apprentice “*of a good house.*”<sup>22</sup> Of this I was a little afraid, for our house was rather wobbly and the tiles were inclined to slip from the roof here and there. But there seemed to be no difficulty about this. Mr. Ranezay examined me first with his bare eyes and then with his eyeglasses, and after that he declared that he would make a bookseller of me and ask no more for it than three florins a month.

Never shall I forget the afternoon that followed. It was unseasonably warm that autumn, though the swallows were already departing. My mother did the washing at the well and I was sitting at her feet under the wash-tub. Neither of us spoke a word, we merely wept softly. Her tears were falling into the tub and mine onto her feet.

But my real torture came only next morning. As my schoolmates were going to the *Veni Sancte*,<sup>23</sup> they knocked on our shutters, door, and fence, and shouted through the chinks in the gate:

“Francis, Francis!”

*This* Dante forgot to include in his *Inferno*!

I hid in shed, pigsty, garret, but all in vain: the buzzing of the happy children reached me everywhere. I couldn’t stand it longer than a week. When my pals passed our house, I waited till they were round the corner and then I dashed off after them. In the market place I hung around among the squatting market-women till I heard the school-bell ring eight o’clock, at which both teachers and children quickened their steps. Then I would circle round the school, first only from afar, then in an ever smaller circle. Maybe this is what Adam did when the door of Paradise closed behind him. If there’s one man in the world who had a taste of what he went through, I am that man!

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<sup>22</sup> The Hungarian expression for “of good family.”

<sup>23</sup> *Veni Sancte Spiritus* - Come, Holy Ghost (part of the Catholic liturgy).

Adam, however, was driven only from Paradise and not from school, and he was debarred only from the covered table, not from books; this could be endured, this one could get used to. Already on the fourth day I was inside the fence. On all fours I stole past the head-master's door and right through the long, whitewashed corridor, till I came to the open door of the third class. There I heard everything; the teacher's explanations, the answers of the boys, the old school-attendant shuffling towards the bell; when I heard that shuffling, I scurried out of school and into the street as fast as one can run on all fours.

Till the middle of September there was no trouble whatever. Even by stealth one can drink gustily out of the well of science, from which I, poor, untidy youngster, was shut off by barbed wire. But then it so happened that the teacher, Mr. Eyszrich, was praising the beauties of the Latin tongue to the third class. How sonorous, how powerful, how concise that language was and how no other language could be compared to it.

"The Latin says: *Unus es Deus*. Which of you knows how to say that in Hungarian?"

Deep silence.

"Well, now, won't anyone dare to try? Matthew Nagy?"

Matthew Nagy was an eminent pupil, son of an estate steward, my rival in the second class. At this challenge he spoke up:

"One you are, God."

"No, that's not quite right! What sort of word order is that?"

Matthew Nagy caught himself up:

"I mean One God you are..."

Again I heard the teacher's voice:

"No, no! Don't you feel that there is something more in the Latin?"

My heart throbbed terror-stricken, but I could not help it, I simply had to shout:

"You alone are God..."

In the same instant my forehead struck against the tiles, for I had become faint with the excitement. Oh, what had I done, what would happen now?

What did happen was that the Latin teacher carried me in his arms into the class, and after that no school fee was ever asked from "landowner" Martin Móra. *Unus es Deus*. You alone are God. Even if you are a little far off, even if you have not much time to look down on Earth...

But, all the same, to me September remains the most sorrowful month of my whole life. Even though I belong to those who cry inwards, tears do come into my eyes whenever in the month of September I see a little boy with his head bowed...

1927

## ZSIGMOND MÓRICZ

(1879-1942)

When Zsigmond Móricz's highly successful short story *Hét krajcár* (Seven Pennies) appeared in 1907, Endre Ady, the leading Hungarian poet of the period, acclaimed it in these words: "This short story is worth as much as a force of revolutionary irregulars." Móricz's activity, his vast work, brought about a revolution in Hungary's literature and in the general approach to things and people in this country.

Like Balzac, Móricz can be said to have created a world in his work - a counterpart of the real world. His novels and short stories abound in a richness of human emotions, whirling passions, violent clashes and extraordinary loves such as one cannot find, perhaps, in any other Hungarian prose-writer. Strongly conscious of the social injustice of his times, he was a man with a realistic turn of mind, a diligent observer and artistic reshaper of the facts of the real world. Though his concern was essentially with facts, he regarded sentiments and emotions as part of the facts of life. He was a literary cartographer of the Hungarian social scene, writing about peasants (*Sárarany*, Pure Gold; *A boldog ember*, The Happy Man; *Pillangó*, Butterfly; etc.), country gentlemen (*Úri muri*, Gentlemen on the Spree; *Kivilágos kivirradtig*, Till the Crack of Dawn; *Rokonok*, The Relatives), aristocrats and rebellious peasants (*Betyár*, The Outlaw), the urban middle-class (*Rab oroslán*, Captive Lion; *Az asszony beleszól*, She Sticks Her Oar in; *Jobb, mint otthon*, Better than Home; etc.), and of the illusions of youth (*Légy jó mindhalálig*, Be Good Unto Death; *Forr a bor*, Fermenting Wine). He has given a comprehensive picture of the world in which he lived and against which he rebelled. He explored the course - and sought to establish the justness - of Hungarian history in his vast trilogy *Erdély* (Transylvania) and in *Rózsa Sándor* which turns around an episode of the War of Independence of 1848.

His historic novels were addressed to his own time, asserting the possibility of constructive national efforts and an honest political administration, and advocating responsibility towards the people. One can here point but to a few aspects of his lifework - his vast encyclopaedic knowledge and a broad range and depth of vision characterize Móricz's great oeuvre.

His short stories, the best of which describe episodes typical of the age with unparalleled dramatic power, were published in seven volumes after his death. Their effect upon both writers and readers has been immense - the young generation of writers has been brought up on Móricz, and many look upon him as their Master. Knowledge of life, dramatic power and irrepressible emotions - these are the things they can learn from him. Móricz's life spanned a crucial period in Hungarian history, one which was fraught with two world wars and full of bitter experience.

## SEVEN PENNIES

The gods in their wisdom have granted the benefit of laughter also to the poor.

The tenants of huts do not wail all the time, often enough a hearty laughter comes ringing from their dwellings. I might even go to the length of saying that the poor often laugh when they have every reason to cry.

I happen to be thoroughly familiar with that kind of world. The generation of the Soós tribe that had brought forth my father went through the direst stages of destitution. At that time, my father worked as a day-labourer in a machine shop. There was nothing for him, nor for anyone else, to brag about in those days. (Yet brag they did.)

And it is a fact that never in my life was I to laugh as much as in those very years of my childhood.

How, indeed, should I ever again have laughed so heartily after I had lost my merry, red-cheeked mother, who used to laugh so sweetly that, in the end, tears came trickling down her cheeks and her laughter ended in a fit of coughing that almost choked her...

But she never laughed as merrily as on the afternoon which we spent searching for seven pennies. We searched, and we found them, too. Three were in the drawer of the sewing machine one in the cupboard... the rest were more difficult to find.

My mother found the first three pennies all by herself. She thought there ought to be more coins in the drawer, for she used to turn a penny by sewing and kept whatever she earned in that drawer. To me, the drawer of the sewing machine seemed an inexhaustible gold mine, and whenever you delved into it, all your wishes came true.

Thus I was flabbergasted to see my mother digging into a mess of needles, thimbles, scissors, bits of ribbon, braid and buttons, and, after she had poked around in them a while, to hear her say in astonishment:

“They have gone into hiding.”

“Who?”

“The coins,” she said with a laugh.

She pulled out the drawer.

“Come on, sonny, let us find the wicked things. Naughty, naughty coins.”

She squatted on the floor and put down the drawer so cautiously, she seemed to fear its contents might fly away; then she daintily turned it upside down, as though she were catching butterflies under a hat.

You couldn’t help laughing over the way she acted.

“Here they are, in here,” she giggled, and was in no hurry to lift up the drawer. “If there’s but a single one, it must be in here.”

I squatted on my heels and watched closely for a shiny coin to creep forth somewhere. Nothing stirred.

To be quite frank, neither of us really believed that there were any inside.

We glanced at each other, laughing over the childish joke.

I touched the drawer as it lay there upside down.

“Ssht!” my mother shushed me. “Keep still, child, or they’ll run away. You have no idea how nimble pennies can be. They run so fast, they simply roll away. My, how they roll...”

We rocked with laughter. We had seen often enough, how easily the pennies could roll away.

When we got over our fit of laughter, I stretched out my hand once more to lift the drawer.

“Don’t!” mother cried out, and I snatched back my finger as if I had scorched it on a stove.

“Easy, you spendthrift. Why be in such a hurry to send them off? They belong to us only while they are safe here, under the hood. Let them remain there for a little while yet. For, you see, I have to do some washing and for that I need some soap, and for the soap I must have at least seven pennies, they won’t give me any for less. I’ve got three already, I need four more, they must be in this little house. They live here, but they hate to be disturbed, and if they grow angry, they’ll vanish and we shan’t ever get hold of them again. Easy, then, for money is a delicate thing and must be handled gently. It wants to be respected. It takes offence quickly, like a sensitive lady... Don’t you know a verse that would lure it from its house?”

Oh, how we laughed while she babbled along! My incantation was odd indeed. It went like this:

“Uncle Coin, I’m no liar,  
Your house is on fire...”

At this I turned the drawer right side up again.

There was every kind of rubbish below it, but coins... there were none.

My mother kept rummaging in the heap, making a sour face, but that didn’t help.

“What a pity,” she said, “that we have no table. It would have been more respectful to turn it over on a table, and then the coins would have stayed put.”

I swept up the things and put them back into the drawer. Mother was doing some hard thinking the while. She racked her brains to remember whether she had some time or other put any money elsewhere, but she couldn’t recall it.

Of a sudden, I had an idea.

“Mother, I know a place where there is a coin.”

“Where is it, sonny? Let us catch it before it melts like snow.”

“There used to be one in the drawer of the glass cupboard.”

“Oh, my lamb, I’m glad you didn’t tell me before, it would surely no longer be there.”

We stood up and went to the cupboard that had lost its glass pane ever so long ago; the penny was actually in the drawer I had suspected it to be in. I had been tempted to filch it for the past three days, but I never mustered enough courage to do so. Had I dared, I would have spent it on candy.

“Now we have got four pennies. Don’t worry, sonny, that’s already the bigger half. All we need is three more. And if it has taken us an hour to find four, we shall find the rest before We have a snack. That will leave me plenty of time to do a batch of washing by nightfall. Come on, let us see, perhaps there are some more in the other drawers.”

All would have been well, had each drawer contained one coin. That would have been more than we needed. For, in the prime of its life, the old cupboard had done service in a prosperous dwelling, where it had harboured many treasures. In our home, however, the poor thing contained little enough – weak-chested, worm-eaten, gap-toothed as it was.

Mother chided each drawer as she pulled it open.

“This one used to be rich - once upon a time. This one never had a thing. This one here always lived on tick. As for you, you miserable beggar, you haven’t a farthing to your name. This one won’t ever have any, we keep our poverty in it. And you there, may you never have a single one: I ask you for a penny just this once, and even so you begrudge it me. This one is sure to be the richest, look!” she burst out laughing, as she jerked open the lowest drawer, which had not a splinter to its bottom.

She hung it around my neck, and we both laughed so hard, we had to sit down on the floor.

“Wait a minute,” she started, “I’ll get some money in a jiffy. There must be some in your father’s suit.”

There were some nails in the wall upon which our clothes were hung. My mother delved into the topmost pocket of my father’s jacket, and, marvel of marvels, her fingers pulled out a penny.

She could hardly believe her eyes.

“Bless me,” she shouted, “here it is. How much does that make? Why, we can hardly manage to count them all up. One - two - three - four - five... Five! All we need is two more. Two pennies, that is nothing. Where there are five, there are bound to be two more.”

She went about feverishly searching all my father’s pockets, but alas, to no avail. She couldn’t find another. Even the merriest jokes failed to lure forth two more pennies.

My mother’s cheeks burned like two red roses with excitement and exertion. She was not supposed to work, for, whenever she did, she was taken ill. This was, of course, a special kind of work, and you can’t forbid people to look for money.

Snack-time came and went. Soon it would be getting dark. My father needed a clean shirt for the morning, and no washing could be done. Well-water alone was not enough to remove the greasy dirt.

Suddenly, mother tapped her forehead:

“How silly of me. I never thought of searching my own pocket! Now that I think of it, I shall have a look.”

She did, and sure enough, there was a penny in it. The sixth one.

A veritable fever took hold of us. Just one more penny was lacking.

“Let me see your pockets, perhaps there is one in them.”

Dear me, it was no good showing them. They were empty.

It was turning dark, and there we were with our six pennies, we might as well have had none for all the use they were. The Jewish grocer granted no credit, and the neighbours were just as penniless as we. Besides, you just couldn’t go and ask for one penny!

The best we could do was to have a good laugh over our own misery.

We were in the very throes of it, when a beggar came by, wailing his sing-song prayer for alms.

Mother almost swooned with laughter.

“Stop it, my good man,” she said, “I have been idle all afternoon, for I am short of one penny to buy half a pound soap with.”

The beggar, a kindly old man, stared at her.

“You are short of one penny, you say?”

“One penny, yes.”

“I’ll give it you.”

“A nice thing to take alms from a beggar!”

“Never mind, my child, I can do without it. All I need is a hole in the ground and a shovelful of earth. That will make everything well for me.”

He put the penny into my hand and shuffled along amidst our blessings.

“Thank goodness,” my mother said. “Now run along...”

She stopped short, then burst into ringing laughter.

“I can’t wash today in any case, but, just the same, it’s none too soon that we scraped together the money: it is getting dark, and I have no kerosene for the lamp.”

She laughed so hard, it took her breath away. A fierce murderous fit of coughing shook her body. She swayed on her feet and buried her face in her palms and, as I drew close to support her, I felt something warm trickling down on my hands.

It was blood, her precious, hallowed blood. That of my mother, who could laugh so heartily as few people can, even among the poor.

1908



## BARBARIANS

### 1

The little dog, the poodle, cocked his ears, sniffed the air, and in the next minute began to bark viciously.

“What’s the matter?” the shepherd asked. But the poodle barked all the more.

“Townsfolk?” the shepherd asked.

The dog stopped barking for a few moments.

“Plainsmen?”

The dog began to bark again.

“Well, then, what’s troubling you?”

The shepherd stretched out full length on his sheepskin cloak in the shadow cast by his ass, and did not pay any more attention to the whole matter.

After a while the two sheep-dogs also noticed the approach of the strangers and began to bark in a deep booming voice. They made such an abominable racket one would think they were being skinned.

But the shepherd already knew that fellow herdsmen were approaching, the poodle had already told him that quite plainly.

It was quite some time before the two shepherds astride their asses could be made out, riding across the parched plain. They came along slowly on their donkeys, their two dogs running round about the donkeys’ legs.

The poodle stood by his master’s feet and did not leave off his fierce barking even for a moment.

The big sheep-dogs gradually quieted down, after recognizing the strangers as shepherds. Perhaps they recognized the dogs too.

They were quiet for a minute or two, then they barked one verse or two, but their heart was not really in it.

Only the poodle did not give up, he continued to yelp as if somebody was mincing him with a knife.

When the two strangers reached the flock, the sheep-dogs picked a fight with the new dogs and all that could be seen was a flurry of snapping jaws and dust and fur. One of the shepherds roared at them from the back of his ass, he even raised his staff and threatened to strike them dead, but he let them be and jogged on towards the sheepskin cloak.

“Hallo.”

“Hallo yourself.”

The shepherd propped himself up on his elbow and took a look at the newcomers.

Then he shouted to the dogs:

“Get away from there!”

At this the dogs snarled at each other in a somewhat friendlier way.

One of the guests dismounted and approached with long waddling steps.

“Good day to you.”

“Same to you.”

He stood up to pay his respects, although the visitor did not deserve the honour because he was his ill-wisher. Our shepherd had heard at the tavern not long ago that the other had said his sheep were the scamps of the plain. Why did he say this about him who had the right to graze his flock wherever his engagement allowed him?

But then one did not immediately show one’s feelings and thoughts. He shook hands with them and said:

“You get down too.”

Then the other shepherd dismounted and they unharnessed the two donkeys. But the donkeys remained standing where they had stopped and did not budge, only their skin quivered under the sting of the gad-flies. At best they wiggled their ears.

The two shepherds took their sheepskin cloaks off their donkeys, spread them out on the parched earth, and lay down. They lay this way facing each other, just starting in front of them. They did not speak.

They were sheep herders all three of them, shepherds who were out with their flock all year and never saw the village, unless it was to attend a wedding feast or a country fair now and then. They were rugged plainmen. Around them was the endless sky, that was all, for while an occasional cloud sailed across the sky, on the ground there was nothing but the chirping crickets. And not too far away a bent wild pear-tree grieved.

The big flock was far off, the boy was with it. The shepherd’s little son, a twelve-year-old stripling; all there was of him was a big hat, a small sheepskin cloak, and a bit of curiosity. So he began to drive the flock back and around dusk he already came up to his father.

The men remained silent even then. A shepherd can spend entire days in silence. When they are together, they are silent together. And even when they go on a visit like this, they are no more talkative.

“And what about the woman?” one of the strange shepherds asked.

He was a big burly man, a freckle-faced tough man with blue eyes and a red moustache. As to the colour of his hair, one couldn’t tell for his hat was pulled down almost to his eyebrows.

The other guest also grunted something. He was a smaller man with a stubby nose and ferrety eyes. He puffed on his pipe, and looked up, but did not say a word.

“She’s been here.”

“When?”

“Oh ’bout a week ago.”

“When’s she coming again?”

“She’ll come all right.”

“Do you have food?”

“I have some.”

“Enough for two weeks?”

“For ten days.”

“Ten days.”

They remained silent again.

Now the boy was standing there too. He just stood and leaned on his crooked staff, silently watching the guests. He would have liked to find out what they wanted, why they had come, but he did not dare to speak. He did not even want to. If they didn't, neither did he. It wasn't urgent.

The sun was setting slowly. It too looked at the three men curiously, it did not know who they were and what they wanted. The sun was sorry that it would have to leave for the fold with its own flock. Would the secret come out by then?

Well, it didn't come out, for the three men just sprawled and smoked, sitting there with crossed legs.

The host only glanced around once, and even then he pretended to look for his flock, but actually he was looking to see whether his staff was within reach.

When the sun went down, life began to stir on the plain. Birds flew overhead, small birds in large swarms. Clouds of gnats rose from the grass or somewhere. The birds were preying on them.

“Listen.”

“What do you want?”

“Do you have a belt?”

“Yes.”

“I saw it last year at the fair; it's ornamented with brass.”

“Yes, it is.”

“You ought to sell it.”

“Sell it?”

“Yes.”

“It's not for sale.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Well, it just isn't. I made it for myself.”

“For yourself?”

“For myself. And my son.”

“And for your son?”

“For him.”

“For the two of you?”

“Of course.”

With that they sat a while longer.

And then it grew quite dark. It grew dark as suddenly as if somebody had blown out a candle.

“And don’t you want to sell it?”

“I said I didn’t.”

At this the burly shepherd seized his staff and quietly drew it closer to him, as though he wanted to get up. The host did not move, he just watched like a sheep-dog, but he was alert.

“That’s your last word?”

But by this time the host was springing to his feet. The two others jumped upon him.

Once, twice, the staffs clashed. First the two staffs struck the single staff, and then one staff struck the host’s head.

He staggered.

“So that’s why you’ve come?”

But he could not say any more, the two savages went at him and beat him to death in a moment. He was lying lifeless on the ground, yet they struck him once or twice more.

The little boy just stood there beside them and stared. It all happened so abruptly he could not even budge.

“Take off your father’s belt,” the red-faced man said to him.

The boy just stood there.

“Take it off!”

The boy turned deathly pale, and keeping his eyes on the men he went over to his father and removed the belt from his waist.

“Give it to me.”

The boy lifted the belt and looked to see which one he should give it to. He just looked and did not notice that one of the staffs was being raised to strike him. It was such a blow on the head that he gave up his soul instantly.

The four dogs, as if they had not understood what was happening, suddenly came to life. The two strange sheep-dogs attacked the other two, seizing each other by the throat. The four bleeding dogs thrashed the ground, whining and yelping.

The little poodle hurled himself at the red-faced shepherd and bit his leg. The shepherd flailed him with his staff and kicked him until he was lifeless.

The four sheep-dogs were not even visible in the dark. They mauled each other for all they were worth.

The two men remained standing, leaning on their staffs, waiting for the dogs to finish. When they came back bleeding and licking their wounds, the red-faced shepherd said:

“Start scratching.”

And the two sheep-dogs started to scratch. They scratched a hole in the earth. But it went too slowly.

The men took short-handled spades from the packs on their asses and helped them.

Once the ditch was dug, the smaller shepherd dragged the body of the boy into it. The man's body, however, was too heavy.

"There's the belt."

He tied the belt around the dead man's neck and dragged him into the ditch.

By the time the moon rose, the dead shepherd and his son, with their three dogs, were into red. The two men built a fire from manure on the grave and fried their bacon. They ate their meal with relish.

"Well, that's that," said the red-faced shepherd. "Let's move on."

They began to drive the flock, and the three hundred sheep began to move across the plain, but it was a slow job, because the animals wanted to lie down and rest. They could not understand why they had to keep on wandering on an empty stomach. But since they had no choice, they went on and on. The four asses ambled after them, and the two wounded sheep-dogs followed limping.

The two shepherds walked calmly after them.

## 2

Ten days later a tall, dark woman could be seen walking across the vast plain.

She was dressed in white linen, on her feet were loose shoes, firmly fastened with twine, and she wore a linen kerchief on her head.

She was carrying a pack on her back and striding swiftly, although she had been walking already for three days. Her village was far away, because her husband, since he was grazing his own flock, did not easily obtain the use of a pasture.

Her heartbeat quickened when she saw the bent wild pear-tree from far away; that was where her husband used to graze his flock.

But this time she could not see her man anywhere.

There was no farmstead or village hereabouts for at least a day's walk. Not a soul anywhere, only the endless plain. If somebody was not in his place, no one could find him. She found the old fireplace and she sat for a while by it.

She wandered all day about the pastures she recalled. But she could not even find a trace of the flock, no fresh trail, no shining little sheep droppings. The dried-up traces were several weeks old. And there had been rain, a storm too, which had washed away the traces long ago.

She slept under the great and fearful sky and could not understand where her man could be. After a short slumber she was on her way eastward to find other shepherds who might know something about him.

She reached a pasture where she saw smoke; it was a merry smoke.

That wouldn't be her man, she could see already from the fire. Her man, poor soul, did not even have the desire to make a fire, if he did not need to. He liked everything dry and his food cold. He never made a fire in the morning, he ate his bread, bacon, and onions just as they were. He made a fire only around noontime or at night, to cook some noodles or a clear soup, and that only for the sake of the boy.

Huge furious dogs attacked her savagely, but she did not fear them because she knew their language; she had been a shepherd's daughter and was also a shepherd's wife. The dogs barked at her but did not harm her.

"Good day, good people," she said when she reached the fire.

A huge red-faced shepherd and three young herdsmen were standing about.

"Has no one seen my husband with his flock? My man is the one who always goes towards the sunset."

"With three hundred sheep?"

"Yes, with three hundred. That's him. Curly the Shepherd, he was called."

"Well, sit down, my good woman."

The woman remained standing for a while, but since no one was inclined to speak she just squatted down with the pack on her back, crouching on her heels and resting in shepherd fashion.

"Well, I don't know where your husband went. He headed towards the sunset."

"I wonder where he could have gone."

"He didn't say where he was going, but he went towards Transdanubia."

"Transdanubia?"

"Twelve or thirteen days ago he came by here. Said he had to be away for a while, because he was in trouble with the pandours."

"Him?"

"Yes, him."

"With the pandours?"

"With the law."

"He never mentioned it. Just two weeks ago today I was out here to see him. He said nothing about it."

"He was a reticent man."

"Reticent, but he would have mentioned that."

The red-faced shepherd offered her the fork with which he had been stirring the kettle of stew.

"Do have some."

"I've eaten."

"Have some, just the same as if you were eating your own. I don't begrudge it."

But the woman only shook her head. She did not reach for the fork, she did not dip into the kettle, although the meat looked good, and there was mush. These men were faring well, so early in the morning.

She looked at the flock. There was a mixture of sheep and ewes of Hungarian breed. She just stared and stared, as if she were looking at her own. If her husband went away, she would have no more sheep, nor ewes.

“I even recall,” said the red-faced shepherd, “when he passed here he was wearing a belt. It was ornamented with brass.”

“That was him,” the woman said, “he liked that belt, he always wore it around his waist.”

“I asked him for it, but he wouldn’t give it to me.”

“No, he wouldn’t have given that to anybody in the world.”

“I offered him whatever he might ask for it, but he wouldn’t hear of it.”

“Oh, my poor, dear husband,” the woman exclaimed, and she clasped her hands.

“Then he said he had to go away.”

“Did he mention me?”

“No, I asked after you, but he didn’t reply.”

“Not even a word?”

“He only said you had been here. I asked him when, and he said about a week ago. That’s what he said.”

“About a week ago? Is that what he said?”

“Yes.”

“But then it’s only been a week since he went by here.”

“Could it have been only a week?”

The woman looked over the young herdsman, but they knew nothing about him.

“They didn’t see him, because they weren’t here yet.”

“Where were they?”

“Oh, here and there.”

“Are they new?”

“New or not new, they weren’t with me.”

“But still why did he come then?”

“He just came. He just came by here with his flock, he was a bit languid. There must have been something wrong, because he was very quiet.”

“That was him.”

She stared in front of her with dry eyes, but her heart felt more and more restless.

“Didn’t he leave any sign?”

“Sign? What for?”

“Well, then...”

She stood up.

“Wasn’t the boy with him?”

“Boy? I saw a lad with him, they were together with the flock.”

“Yes?”

“He had two sheep-dogs, and a poodle.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, why don’t you wait for him? Maybe he’ll be back by autumn.”

“I’ll go after him.”

“Well, suit yourself. You’re welcome to stay here. We wouldn’t be put out. You could stay here for a day.”

“To Transdanubia, he said?”

“To Transdanubia.”

“Then I’m going after him to Transdanubia.”

“Always towards the setting sun.”

“I’ll ask somebody.”

With that the woman stood up again, shook the pack on her back, nodded her head, and went on her way.

The shepherds looked after her a long time. They ate and drank. Wine from a wooden flask. Then they got up and tended their flock.

And the woman went and went until she disappeared. She was swallowed up by the vast plain. The sun rose higher and higher in the sky and watched the dark woman dressed in white linen walking on and on across the plain. And she just went and went. She did not even look towards her home. She just went and went on the endless plain until she was lost in the distance. She walked until she reached the Danube. She crossed the river, having found a boatman who took her across. And on she went.

She went wherever she heard of shepherds grazing their flock.

She went all summer, went until the first snow fell. She wandered over every pasture, visited every flock and sat down to talk to every shepherd and ask whether he had not heard of a straight little reticent man with three hundred sheep.

For the winter she went home to her village. She opened the house with the key which she had concealed under the eaves and passed the winter at home. By that time her pig had grown, her hens and chickens multiplied, because the neighbours had watched over them while she had been away.

With the coming of spring she could not bear to stay at home any longer. The poodle had a puppy; he too was a smart little black dog, and she said to him:

“Come, little poodle, let’s go find your master.”

She went out into the plain again. She carried what she could on her back and walked forth to the place where she had left the shepherd.

She found the great pear-tree again. She settled down as if she wanted to spend the summer there.

And she stayed there for two weeks, or three, she did not count the days. She watched the dog. When she ran out of food, she went home again, packed up once more and returned. Out to the great plain where some other shepherd was already grazing his flock.



The hot days and the rainy ones came and went. But she could not tear herself away from the place, she just wandered around in the vastness.

Then one day the poodle found something. He brought a hat.

“My husband’s,” she said, “where did you find it, poodle?”

The dog led her to the place.

The poodle scratched in a bit of smooth sand. He scratched furiously, barking and whining and snarling. He scratched and scratched.

Then he uncovered a hand.

The woman fell to scratching with her ten fingers in the sand, and soon the body of her husband was before her, the flesh rotting away. Around his neck was the brass-ornamented belt.

She found her son too. The child lay face down and his big hat was on his head. As she lifted the hat she saw the big wound on his little head. The mother stared at it with dry eyes. Just one blow with a stick and that was the end. He had not suffered long.

She sat by the grave all day long. At night she scratched the sand back. She made a little mound over the grave and stuck two stakes in it in the form of a cross. Then she walked eastward.

By morning she found the flock.

“Where is that red-faced shepherd,” she asked, “who grazed his flock in these parts last year?”

“In Szeged,” said the strange shepherds.

“So I thought.”

“The pandours heard about his tricks and took him away for questioning.”

The woman did not rest, she started for Szeged.

She arrived on the third day. She went to the chief of the pandours and related everything.

The pandours went out and took her along with a horse and wagon.

They dug up the grave, wrote down what they saw. They removed the belt from the body of the dead shepherd and went back to Szeged.

### 3

The examining judge conducted an inquiry.

He questioned one prisoner after another. Facts began to accumulate and it was clear that the red-faced shepherd had been responsible for a whole series of thefts and murders. There was already enough to send him to the gallows when the examining judge asked him:

“And what about Curly the Shepherd?”

The shepherd did not bat an eyelash.

“Curly the Shepherd?”

“That’s what he was called, when he was still alive.”

“When he was still alive?”

“While he lived he was called Curly the Shepherd. And what happened to him?”

“I don’t know him Sir.”

“He grazed his flock beside you, on the puszta of Csobor. Together with his little boy.”

“That’s possible.”

“Do you know him now?”

“If he’s the one who went over to Transdanubia.”

“It would be good to know where he went. To Transdanubia, or elsewhere?”

“Well, he visited me on his way there, that’s true. He was in some kind of trouble with the law, and he was going towards the setting sun for a while.”

“The setting sun or a resting place?”

“A resting place, I think.”

“That’s what I think too. And you helped him to get there.”

“I, Sir?”

“Him and his son.”

“Never, Sir.”

“See here, justice has caught up with you finally. You only have to own up to this last one. What had Curly the Shepherd done to you?”

“Nothing, Sir.”

“Done nothing to you?”

“I had absolutely no difference with him.”

“Then why did you say in the tavern of Csűr that he was grazing his flock where he shouldn’t?”

The red-faced shepherd’s eyebrows quivered.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Others heard it.”

“Nobody could have heard it.”

“They heard it, and you know that very well. To whom did you say it?”

“If I said it, that wasn’t why.”

“Then why?”

“I didn’t say it because of that. A shepherd is allowed to graze wherever his engagement says he may.”

“He had three hundred sheep. Where did he disappear with them? He couldn’t have disappeared from the face of the earth. Right?”

“Right.”

“But if he’s disappeared, then his sheep should be around. Were they rams or ewes?”

“Mostly rams, if there were any.”

“Of course there were. Did they belong to him or to the landlord?”

“He’d be able to tell you.”

“What did he tell you?”

“I never spoke with him.”

“Then how did you know?”

“Others told me. I saw them. He grazed his flock beside mine. He wasn’t very talkative. He was a reticent man.”

“Was he reticent?”

“Yes... he was.”

“Then too?”

“When?”

“When you clubbed him to death with your staffs. Both him and his son.”

“Did he have a son?”

“He had a son. You struck him just one blow on the head and he was finished.”

“Don’t say such things to me, please. I never spoke with him, neither him nor his son.”

“If you didn’t speak, then he could not have spoken. He was a reticent man.”

“What does Your Honour want of me?”

“I want you to unburden your soul. One more or less.”

“I can’t own up to what doesn’t concern me.”

“Think about it.”

“I’ve nothing to think about.”

“Did you take spades with you?”

“Spades?”

“On your asses.”

“Asses?”

“Because it was a clean job.”

“I had nothing to do with it, Sir.”

“Did you drive off the sheep?”

“I had sheep of my own, Your Honour, I wasn’t curious ‘bout anybody else’s.”

“But they were fine sheep. Three hundred. He was a good man, Curly the Shepherd. He acquired them by himself, he saved his earnings.”

“Maybe. But I know nothing about it.”

“Are the sheep still with your flock, or have you sold them?”

“Don’t say such things to me, I beg you.”

“Now listen to me, you’re no child! Anybody who has admitted all his crimes ought not haggle over three hundred sheep. What is that to you? Now when you can go before God with a cleansed soul do you want Curly the Shepherd to tarnish it?”

“Can’t help it.”

“I could spit in your face, like some snivelling brat’s. You went there after sunset, struck them on the head, killed their dogs and buried them in the sand.”

The red-faced shepherd grew more stubborn. His eyes burning, he glared at the examining judge.

“It was none of my doing, Your Honour.”

“Get out of here, you insolent... I don’t want to see you anymore.”

The shepherd staggered.

“Get out of my sight. You’re no shepherd, you’re a filching scoundrel! Rest assured that you will not have peace on the gallows either.”

“What was none of my doing, I can’t admit.”

“Get out!”

The shepherd turned around and started for the door with big heavy steps. When he reached the door and wanted to put his hand on the doorknob, he reeled backward.

He could not touch the doorknob. He could not move, he just stared and stared and his mouth began to froth.

There, hanging on the doorknob was the brass-ornamented leather belt.

The shepherd slowly touched his head, then he turned around.

“Your Honour... I confess...”

The examining judge did not say a word, he only looked at the man with eyes like glowing embers.

“We killed Curly the Shepherd for his three hundred sheep and two asses.”

With that he bowed his head.

The examining judge looked at him for a long time, then he rang the bell.

Two pandours entered.

“Take him away. Give him twenty-five strokes with a cane.”

The shepherd bowed his head and went out through the door, a broken man.

“Thank you very much.”

The judge looked after him and reflected:

“Barbarians.”

1932

## MARGIT KAFFKA

(1880-1918)

Margit Kaffka, Hungary's greatest woman writer, came of a family of impoverished nobles, who had clung desperately to the forms of their old way of life and, though sunk in debts and ground down by poverty, refused to work and live according to the new times. Kaffka broke through the prison bars of this *milieu* - after several wretched years in a nunnery, years that provided her with enough experience to last a lifetime, she became at first a primary-school and subsequently a secondary-school teacher.

She was twenty when she first sent in her poems to Budapest newspapers. Soon afterwards she published her first volume. She became a contributor to *Nyugat* (West), the most progressive Hungarian periodical of the time. She began to pour forth a vast number of poems, short stories and novels. *Hangyaboly* (The Ant-hill) treats the soul-cramping educational methods used in the convent school; *Színek és évek* (Sights and Seasons) - her most important novel - tells of the battle waged by the emerging new type of woman against the decaying world of the old ruling class; *Állomások* (Stages) is a *roman de clef*, the romantic story of Kaffka's literary battles and private life.

She died young, of influenza, within a few days of her little son's death from the same insidious epidemic.

"Better for us to fight and live militantly than to shed tears and keep waiting, give birth and live in fear. Remember, ye men, that, like yours, women's blood is no dearer in battle than in love's embrace," she wrote in one of her poems. She took an absorbing interest in the modern problems of woman's emancipation, of her new opportunities and tasks. And as the surging femininity of her message burst the banks of conventional lyric poetry, Kaffka became one of the chief cultivators in Hungarian poetry of the *vers libre*. On account of their bold message and exquisite, womanly, evocative lyricism, her novels and short stories are still effective today.

## SMOULDERING CRISIS

The weather was cool in the morning as they arrived and rang the bell of the slumbering house. The first ship had brought them, at the break of day, while the piercing, booming blast of the factory sirens on the riverside was still vibrating over the Danube and a moist breeze was fitfully sweeping through the dim streets.

The two youths watched the dawn reddening the cold, steely surface of the waters; they had beheld the faintly budding trees on the islands, the heavily laden barges gliding by and the wherries gently resting on the spring-time flood. Their smooth young faces had grown ruddy in climbing the hilly street of the small summer resort, and now they stood panting at the green trellis-gate.

Theresa came hurrying towards them through the small garden - gentle, cheerful Theresa, embodiment of the kindly spirit of a peaceful home. The keys jingled in her hand as she greeted them with the reserved joy of deep affection:

“So here they are, the young masters from Budapest!”

She pretended to recognize the other one, the guest as well, of whose coming she knew already. She fluttered around them, touching her young master’s shoulder fleetingly with trembling finger-tips, then went a few steps ahead, only to turn back again.

“Shall I wake the mistress now?” she inquired, waiting anxiously and hesitatingly for a “no.”

“By no means!” Paul reassured her. “Mother is only expecting us in the evening, isn’t she? We’ll surprise her. Now, lay the breakfast table for three, please, and just give us something to drink. But don’t tell her, Theresa, before she comes out of her room. Come on, Francis, we’ll make ourselves at home in the meantime. By the way, Theresa, this is Master Francis. Are you still heating?”

The tiles of the stove in the glass-covered veranda serving as dining-room were lukewarm and the feebly glowing embers had spread a pleasant warmth through the room, for which one was grateful, since this was the week before Easter and the mornings were still fresh and cool. Through the glass-wall giving to the east a flood of brilliant white sunshine poured in, lighting up the silver and the cups which Theresa had set on the breakfast table in well-mannered silence. Paul was at home here - he walked hither and thither with a smile, pulling a rush arm-chair to the fire, pouring and offering a drink to his friend.

“French brandy - it isn’t bad, is it? And the cakes are crisp. Theresa is in fine fettle today. She is a real treasure, our Theresa. She has been with us for more than fifteen years. But, you know, a bit of an old maid at times - a little crotchety.”

With a student’s impetuosity he talked easily and unrestrainedly of everyday matters, of unimportant things. His pleasant boyish face reflected eagerness and tender solicitude. The guest was more reticent, but keenly and seriously attentive.

“One more,” Paul urged. “Let’s drink to the success of your essay. By the by, what happened to it? Did you hand it in?”

“The assistant promised to call the old man’s attention to it. I don’t pin many hopes on it!”

“If the venerable gentleman only recognized in you his eventual successor at the faculty of historical-philosophy!”

Paul uttered these childish words in open-hearted sincerity. They were both of them nineteen, having just matriculated with honours, and their satchels, like those of all prize pupils, were chock-full of the anticipated finery of brilliant achievements, a finery destined, in the course of time, to lose its glitter, to fade and decay until nothing remained but the dreary, shabby uniform of daily existence... But now they were nineteen...

"Come along," Paul said to his friend, "let's have a look around the house. On tiptoes, please! There are only three rooms besides this one - mother's sitting-room, her bedroom, and my own. We will sleep in mine, your bag is there already. Now, let's change our collars, shall we? They got rather sooty on the ship."

Again he was mothering the plebeian lad, telling him how to dress, his own handsome, pleasant face beaming with sympathy and affection while his well-bred manners, acquired by long training, took the edge off his words. Obediently, but with a smile that was, perhaps, a little wry, Francis washed his hands and then gave his clothes a good brushing.

"One can see, Paul, that you grew up at your mother's side," he remarked later, sunk in thought.

They went into the sitting-room of the lady of the house, amid its bronze and reseda-green wallpaper, where one could perceive the light but significant fragrance of a perfume lingering in the matutinal semi-darkness behind the drawn lace curtains. Paul, on entering the room, stopped for a moment.

"How beautiful!" sighed his friend involuntarily.

"Isn't it?" smiled Paul, "I too love this room, it is so real, so much like its owner. Everything in it is so very much mother!"

With tender emotion, he nodded towards the bedroom, speaking in a hushed voice, so as not to disturb his mother's sleep, and seeming rather to address the furniture and other well-remembered objects.

"Look, this is the table on which she writes her letters. The writing-tables of other women are narrow, towering affairs, encumbered with stupid knick-knacks. This one is not very big, but smooth and capacious, with its polished glasstop and rounded corners. It is beautifully shaped and somehow tranquil, don't you think so? The whole room, indeed, has a tranquil effect, doesn't it? This large carpet is only imitation Persian, but it is in good taste. I am familiar with all the odds and ends in here, and I know how mother longed for them and dreamed of them for years, saving up for a long time, until at last she would discover just what she wanted in some window-display at an antique dealer's or in a second-hand shop. There's nothing that's silly and useless in here - with the one exception of this silver-plated baby-shoe: it was mine, when I was a year old. Look, how the heel is worn down."

The other lad looked at everything, quietly, without a word and moved despite himself. A strange sense of well-being pervaded him here in this room. His eyes - accustomed to crocheted tidies, plush-bound albums and fretwork boxes - were not irritated here by any arrogant display of riches or the cold, reserved massiveness of built-in furniture, which always made him sad and hostile in very elegant rooms. Here everything looked natural, light - yet meaningful - and agreeably moderate. Cushions of plain-coloured smooth silk, and old brocade, a Japanese lampshade - discreetly gay - some unglazed clay figurines or pen-and-ink drawings in simple frames - the boy did not take in all these things one by one, but he had a comprehensive sense of the intimacy, the gentle harmony and the underlying, almost painful

fascination emanating from this room. He thought it was the strange fragrance of the perfume that had dazzled him and rendered him pensive.

"I never knew my mother," he said overcome with an almost childlike emotion, of which he was ashamed the next moment.

"Not all mothers are like," replied Paul seriously, turning the pages of a book. "Most of them are old-fashioned, ignorant, simple-minded and forever complaining - we cannot do otherwise than love them and deceive them. Mum is quite different! She is the most clever human being on earth and a real, good friend. You can't imagine the things one can discuss with her quite freely! She is not shocked by anything, she takes everything in the right spirit."

"Is this your father?"

Hanging above the writing-table was a small patinotype portrait of a lean and elegant man in uniform, lounging in a rocking-chair; his keen, eloquent and tense face with its peculiarly animated eyes seemed to lean out of the frame.

"My father? Oh, no, dad's picture is in my room. He died young, less than a year after his marriage. This is Baron Welling, a German naval officer, who died last year, poor man. He was a very good friend of mother's."

Gravely, somewhat eagerly, Paul went on turning the pages of the book, but the other youth did not look his way. Francis was pondering about something else. His friend - he thought - though of the same age, had already grown into a man, leaving him, Francis, behind in more than one respect. Women, for instance - and a lot of other things. Paul had a quick and ready wit, a directness that helped him to become well versed in various spheres of life which he himself contemplated thinking about more seriously at some later date. Francis, up to now, had been absorbed in the struggle for good marks, scholarships, advancement; everything had been achieved with so much difficulty...

"Ah, mum is up!" exclaimed Paul and putting his book down, quickly rushed out. Through the open door the merry ringing of laughter and rejoicing could be heard on the veranda. The first embrace was over by the time Francis joined Paul and his mother, and introduced himself.

"Welcome, Mr. Farkas, that is, Francis - if I may call you so. We were expecting you already for Christmas. Paul does not like anybody as much as you and there is nobody he thinks so highly of! You are just the same age, aren't you? Now, wait, let me see you together, side by side."

She smiled. Her son, she noted, was more neatly turned out, his face more attractive, his body more vigorous. Then she looked again at the young stranger, at his somewhat sallow, longish face, thin lips and large, hazel eyes. Apart from those canny Hungarian peasant eyes, warm and a little clouded, there was nothing attractive about him.

They sat down to breakfast, enveloped by the aroma of freshly made coffee, and talked about trifles as is usual in getting acquainted. Only now was Francis able to observe his friend's mother surreptitiously, yet more leisurely. He was surprised. Paul had indeed told him once that she was only thirty-seven, but she looked even younger. Was this on account of her well-preserved dainty figure or of the light-grey dressing-gown, profusely adorned with white lace, which she gracefully drew over her slender white arm as she reached for the milk? But her face too, with its tranquil, oval profile and ivory complexion, was of the kind that withers late; it was crowned with thick, dark-brown hair which clung to the regular forehead in soft, abundant waves. The sun threw a wide band of bright yellow across the table and over the woman's shoulder. Paul lifted her hand caressingly to his lips. And again the same unfamiliar



reflection crossed Francis' mind: how good it was to be here, in this bright, clean place, with the lukewarm, white stove, the flowerpots on the window-sill, the Japanese cups, the smiling woman bending her lace-covered shoulders over the table; all this, no doubt, belonged to the good things of life which he yet had to struggle for, which some day he had to win for himself.

The cup in his hand clicked slightly; he put it down, somewhat clumsily, and looked around in alarm. Nothing happened. Paul, wreathed in smiles, was softly explaining something and the maid was closing the door without a sound. How strange, how novel all his impressions were - yet nothing was really happening here. An ordinary morning, a spring-day morning - the escape from work, worry and fatigue - the fresh wind of dawn, the pleasant smell of the wide river, the hooting of the ships, the quick, panting climb up the short slope with its light-green patches of sprouting grass - that was all! And now there would be the holidays and repose, the bright and neat little house, pleasant words, and a smile, a woman's smile, radiating kindness. In the course of a few seconds, a host of dreams and emotions swarmed through his being: simple, clean, stirring, they told him of a life still before him, brimful of good things within the reach of clever, confident and struggling young man who could afford to await his turn with patient obstinacy. Wordly ease, repose, good taste and, yes, a house and a woman - he had hardly ever thought of these up to now.

The lady of the house raised her eyes to him fleetingly and mutely, thinking perhaps of nothing, or maybe far away in her thoughts; he felt confused, but returned her look nevertheless. The woman's eyes, bedded in deep shadows, were grey, iridescent, and seemed to live a life of their own, independent of her face, and almost in disharmony with it. An unfamiliar, naive compassion flared up in the boy's heart - altogether virginal and unconscious - of the kind that is apt to arise in our hearts when we are faced with the mystery and sadness of beauty.

They spent the morning exploring the bookcase in Paul's room. It was already eleven by the time the lady of the house joined them; she carried a key in her hand and brought them ham and rolls, and some new books. They chatted. She kept looking at her son, as if disturbed by a hidden misgiving, while she inquired about the other youth's problems, about his studies, ambitions, finances; she did this with infinite tact and with a goodness of heart that tended to veer around delicate questions. Smilingly she averted the thanks which the lad was about to utter for her kindness in having helped him, at that time still a stranger, by securing him a scholarship.

After all, he was Paul's friend, she reminded him, and nobody else had such a good influence on her son! Through prudent, nonchalant questioning she sought to find out whether the two room-mates were leading an orderly life in town, whether they were taking care of each other and of their health? Paul was still quite a child sometimes, wasn't he? She quoted Francis' opinions, his very words, on various subjects, revealing that she knew everything. The young man realized with astonishment that the intimacy between the two friends had always been shared by a third person: Paul had a second confidant in his mother. She was no stranger to any of their favourite ideas, their casual theories, the alluring discoveries of two thinking and enthusiastic minds - she had a part in all of them. Was there perhaps a shade of the tutor's tender guidance in her, or maybe was it merely the devotion of a mother, learning the alphabet herself so as to keep step with her child? Francis mused as he watched her. She seemed enthusiastically attracted by the latest trends, which at times were decidedly revolutionary, her taste was that of the young generation, her sympathies belonged to the seekers, to youth breaking with authority. But, in her, all that appeared to be imbued with more intelligence and purpose, with a noble forgiveness or with the superior melancholy of those who had already

travelled along these paths, who had already drawn for themselves the conclusion flowing from their life and its successes, and who now conceded the same right to those coming after them. There was no trace of affectedness in her words, which, rather, had a natural charm that was entirely hers.

“Wonderful, wonderful,” the boy mused. “And to think that she is a woman, that a woman - somebody’s mother can also be like this!” And he thought of his female relatives, the shrewish wives of artisans or, at best, the stunted wives of impecunious clerks.

Paul read a few of his poems to his mother. They were newfangled verses, written in the curiously rough and unmelodious style of the young revolutionaries, who in giving daring, rustically unpolished expression to their ideas, often threw an unexpected light on their subject. “Poems worthy of our best contemporaries. Lyrics of stupefaction!” - somebody had once called them sarcastically.

The mother listened with grave attention.

“You see,” she turned to Francis later on, “we really could get them published already. The poems are good, don’t you agree, and we have acquaintances working on leading papers. But still, I would like to wait. Paul is going abroad in two years, after he has finished his law studies, and I would like him to be free and unhampered then. Maybe he will only laugh at his own rhymes by the time he returns and will want to draw up a political programme instead. Or perhaps he will bring back something quite his own and from the depth of his soul he will write what nobody has ever written before him. Something divinely simple, for instance.”

“I also believe,” said Francis, “that it is better to come before the public at one go and only when one is complete.”

The woman continued to observe her son. She had spoken just now in a tone that was almost insistent. Paul kept quiet and somewhat annoyed, put his poems aside. His mother went on returning to the same subject, to the planned journey, the towns where he would stay during that year, so that he might traverse the whole of Europe at leisure and unencumbered by schedules, looking at everything with an open mind, and finally return to the place dearest to his heart. One could see that this was a favourite idea of hers, and that she expected much of it, hoping it would transform her son into a new, a mature man. She was not too well off, Francis knew, and he found it strange that Paul made no reply.

“How she loves him,” Francis thought, his heart going out to her. “Does he always deserve it? Deserve such a mother!” he added fervently.

Outside, the postman came by with a letter for Paul, and Theresa announced that lunch was served. Paul opened the letter and after reading it, thrust it in his pocket with a serious mien, evidently moved. Nobody asked any questions and there was silence for a minute.

The lady of the house paid special attention to her guest during lunch and asked him sundry questions with polite courtesy. She seemed to be seriously interested in everything the young man had to say. An animated conversation soon developed. Her quiet, unusual objections prompted Francis to respond; he grew increasingly excited, becoming almost eloquent like all students of his type whenever they talk of their studies. He drew pedantic parallels, which he himself had discovered and developed, and which constituted his favourite preoccupation up to now. The woman smiled, then suddenly looked into his face, and her large, sad, iridescent eyes held him prisoner for an instant. “How aimless all this is, how vain and petty!” her gentle glance seemed to tell him. And the young man was taken aback. For, now and then, a similar misgiving had dawned upon him, a suspicion that all those lifeless words, these stubborn,

superficial theories were drying up at their roots and that soon, quietly and unbidden, life itself would reveal to him - he knew not what, something new, radiant with beauty and throbbingly alive. These intuitions were born of the momentary intellectual crisis of his nineteen years. The woman smiled.

In the meantime Theresa punctiliously and sedately changed the plates and served the next course, while Paul studied his plate in meditative silence.

"I shall withdraw for half an hour's rest," said the woman rising first from the table at the end of the meal. "You could go for a walk, meanwhile, through the village, towards the woods."

She scrutinized them, had their coats brushed, and undid and reknotted Francis' tie in mock consternation, her white, slender fingers fussing over this task with motherly care. She seemed surprised when she noticed the sudden blushing of the young face. "It is all right now!" she hastily remarked, touched his shoulder gently, and sent them on their way.

The trees were sprayed over with the pale-green enamel of opening buds, and the sun threw moistly glittering patches amid the sparse trunks. One could feel the first, bitter-sweet manifestations of recrudescing life in this calm afternoon; one could hear the whispered murmur of the brooklets trickling at the bottom of the ravines.

The two youths parted now and again, by mute agreement treading their separate ways through the rustling dry leaves of the past autumn, only to come together again shortly; erratically they stopped and went on and then stopped again full of vague, new emotions in this dreamy mildness of early spring.

Francis tried to think of Paul - of their friendship, the strongest, purest, most sincere and most carefully tended emotion of his adolescence. They were, both of them, drawn towards an idealized concept of "goodness," they were inclined to take things seriously, and to revere their own idols - the one because of his upbringing, and the other, because of the undifferentiated simplicity, the healthy normality, the humility of his peasant nature. Francis' life had always been difficult and dreary. He had lived, as a small child, in the household of his bachelor uncle, a master carpenter; from there he had been sent to an orphanage, where his alertness had been noticed and it had been decided to give him an education. For a long time now he had been earning his own living by giving private lessons and copying maps. He had met Paul already during their secondary school years, but saw his friend's home and mother for the first time today. Their home struck him as the embodiment of refined gentility. Now he thought he understood everything in his friend who had attracted him by the force of contrast; his good manners, his confidence, the sincerity and charm of his spirit. Paul had grown up here, in this orderliness and tranquillity, amid tender and quiet words, where each person insensibly observed and respected the other's spiritual life and where even the servant's moods were taken account of. "Such women," he thought quite simply, "are born to spread tranquillity around them and to offer refuge to others. But besides, there is in her some indescribable and unique value." Of a sudden he saw her eyes and her soft white hands before him. He sought to identify the strangely deep and exalted impulses which had taken hold of his unspoiled, young nature in a few short hours. Was it gratitude to Paul's mother, or homage, perhaps because she seemed to him the model of feminine perfection? He stood still blushing profusely; he felt the blood rushing to his face and forehead, took a deep breath and waited for his friend, who now and again whistled to him.

Paul caught up with him, and laying his arm tenderly around Francis' shoulders, said with a smile:

"I was just thinking, how good it is to have you here with us, right now, old fellow. Haven't you noticed that there is something in the air? I want to talk to mother today."

The other stared at him.

"Well, you know, it's about Miriam. She wrote today. This has to be settled at last. I believe it won't be difficult. What do you think?"

They were silent. Their tender, roaming dreams had ended. Paul was gravely watching his friend's face. Something new had come between them - the girl, an element of disharmony. A solution had to be found. Would it be easy? At this moment, Francis looked coolly at the whole affair as something strange, violent, immature and irresponsible. This girl, whom his friend called Miriam...

Francis knew her. They had met her in the small provincial town where they had passed their secondary-school years. She was the orphaned daughter of a grocer. Together with her older sister, who did some sewing on the side, she kept the corner shop at the upper end of the sloping row of houses near the cemetery. Francis recreated her in his imagination - the wellnigh provocative radiance of her youthful beauty; the tousled head of a gifted schoolgirl, the awkward little shoes, the well-made, boldly fashionable clothes of inexpensive material clinging to her slender figure; the charmingly hoydenish arrogance of her respectability. Again he saw before him, in its entirety, that proud eccentric little creature, revolutionary, happy-go-lucky, astute. And he recalled the almost grossly demonstrative candour of the love that had sprung up between his friend and this girl, under the auspices of Tacitus and the new sociologists, amid the envious jealousy or protective sympathy of the student body of the two secondary schools. Miriam - otherwise Mary Braun - was exceptionally beautiful and by no means trivial, Francis thought, but still...

Paul took his arm, forcing him to keep pace with him in slow, measured steps, and began to talk to him quietly and persuasively, in his light, expansive and expressive manner.

"Now that you know my mother, you are afraid of the whole thing, you must admit! But I think you are mistaken. First of all, you know what Miriam is like. Or, rather, you don't know! If you could only read her letters! You cannot imagine a spirit more charming, more original, more precious. And she is so willing to learn and even to improve her appearance. She is full of natural refinement, don't you agree?"

"Yes, undoubtedly."

"And you really misjudge mamma, I think, I want to tell you something about her."

Francis felt as if something had hit him, as if somebody wanted to hurt him. He tried to hide his passionate interest. Paul was grave and apparently in a communicative mood.

"My mother," he began, "loved a German marine officer for many years, ever since she became a widow - his name was Baron Welling. You have seen his portrait in the sitting-room. They met somewhere while travelling, I have never known anyone like him. He was in active service and perhaps marriage would have harmed his career, or maybe mum did not want to move so far away on account of me, or possibly there was something else - I believe they rarely talked about the reasons - they just knew it was better and more beautiful like that. It was a wonderful love and remained completely untroubled for a long time. They spent a month together every year in Grado, or in some other small seaside resort, mostly in May. My holidays always came later." He broke off a budding twig, nibbled at it, then swished it through the air.

“Once,” he continued, tenderly smiling, “it was when I was in the seventh form, and we were discussing drama in the Hungarian literature class. I was a real teen-ager, with all sorts of ideas in my head, and something flared up in my heart. I saw myself as a man, destined to protect the integrity of my name, a Telemachus, Penelope’s son, or somebody like him. Well, I decided after my examination to talk to mama. I began with some stupid allusion - it was a disgraceful act I can never forgive myself. If you could only have seen her then, the calm, rational, sad irony with which she answered and the curt and haughty way - such as I had never yet experienced - in which she put an end to the whole thing. I could not repeat the whole scene to you now, but I learned a lot from it. I don’t know whether you understand what I am trying to say.”

The other nodded mutely.

“You know, of course, Francis, that from the moment I was born, I took up the whole life of another human being, my mother. When I was small, she used to dress me herself, she bathed me of an evening, and lying down in her clothes beside me on my small bed, she would whisper tales to me and sing me to sleep. One grows selfish so easily when one is loved. I thought I was all in all to her, that she had no life, no desires or rights apart from myself. She never failed me in anything, a kind word or the gilded nuts at Christmas-time. I thought myself entitled to demand that, for my sake, she should not live a life of her own. Now I know better.”

“Even later mother never talked much of these things, but she gave me books on the relationship of man and woman, books on future society and man’s anarchic independence. Of course, old fellow, I know that not all books contain the gospel truth. But the following summer I became acquainted with Uncle Wellington - you remember, I wrote you from Pola at the time. I spent the last week together with them, and he was the only man, besides you, of whom I’ve grown very fond. And he had a great influence over me - if you only knew what an exceptionally admirable man he was, the only man in the whole world made for mother.”

“Is he dead?” asked Francis curtly.

“He died a year and a half ago. Yes, there were sad things to follow. A hidden hereditary insanity developed very gradually in his marvellous brain - I learned only later that mama had known about it years before. Both of them had known it. They had been expecting it, studying its pathology and hiding this knowledge from each other. Oh, it must have been dreadful. Mother loved him dearly. Even now it is almost unbearable to recall how, in the meantime, she wrote letters to my professors, discussed my new suit with the tailor, and studied Virgil with me during my holidays. Once the baron came here for a day, he seemed rather strange already. His family was at the time trying to force him to marry a niece, a thirty-two-year-old baroness, whom they wanted him to wed because of some complications in connection with an inheritance. Then during the last autumn came the news of the engagement, altogether unexpectedly, and two weeks later he had a fit aboard his ship. Mother received his last letter together with this news. He died the following spring in a sanatorium.”

The youngsters had reached soft ground which dampened the sound of their steps. Dusk was spreading among the slender tree trunks. They came to a thin hazel grove, and from there turned silently homewards along the grey ruins of the ancient castle walls. Paul was wondering what had made him relate this story.

“Yes,” he resumed, “you see, I learned at that time that one has to experience certain things oneself, good things and bad things, independently even from those nearest to one. Mother has since remained the same towards me as before; never has she neglected me, we spent the next

summer together in Switzerland and it was a wonderful time for me. As I became more mature, she talked to me as a father or a doctor would. Given the present social structure, she knew that I could not remain inexperienced, nor did she want me to, but at any rate she did succeed in preserving my good humour and my health. She kept her suffering to herself and I never even asked her about it. But I know from all that has happened that she desires to treat me and that she will treat me in just the same way when faced with my problems.”

“Do you want to marry that girl?” asked Francis, a shade of hidden irritation in his voice.

“Of course,” replied his friend, looking at him candidly. “How could I do otherwise? We would encounter too many difficulties, were we to go in for free love - and besides, we intend to have children. Mama must see to it that I get exempted from military service. Miriam finishes school this year. You know, don’t you, that next year she is going to study at the university. We shall attend courses together, as man and wife, and the two of us will study together. That will be splendid, don’t you think so? The three of us, I mean! You, of course, will be the third!” he added with a laugh, misinterpreting his friend’s silence. “I am convinced, you see, that mother will also regard this as an ideal solution. That two healthy and intelligent people should be united while they are still young and unspoilt in soul and body. That they should be able to follow and control each other continuously in their mental development and remain always the same for one another. I have known this girl for two years, and I could never love anybody else as I love her.”

Twilight was spreading over the fields already and the lights in the windows were blinking at the two young men. Francis made no reply, he quickened his pace and holding his walking stick in the middle, twirled it around absent-mindedly with his strong fingers. Many thoughts occupied his mind, but he did not know which one to concentrate on, how to cope with the many new impressions besetting him so suddenly. He was less experienced in worldly matters, but more moderate and positive than his friend, and he had the feeling that something was wrong somewhere. All his knowledge so far had come from books, and he had adopted the views of an ancient philosopher about “women”; he had only the vaguest notions concerning the current social forms of the relationship between men and women. And here was his friend seriously talking of revolution and future social institutions. And - of all the childish nonsense - Paul wanted to get married according to Forel’s or someone else’s prescriptions, naively, of silly, stubborn sentimentality, to marry his first love. Francis had never taken the whole affair seriously, and now he was tempted to laugh impatiently and with a trace of hostility, as Paul talked of his private affairs, of his human problems. No, this was just playing at being grown-up. Why, they were still mere children, both of them!

Then he remembered that Paul had been brought up like this by his mother, in a world of ideal abstractions, amidst theories and without conventions. She had backed up his friendship with Francis, the son of an artisan, because she had believed the latter to be the best amongst his class-mates. She it was that had inculcated in her son an aversion to vulgar substitutes for love and a compassionate sympathy, amounting to self-accusation for the poor girls who were society’s outcasts, instead of the burlesque joking and obscene familiarity so common in others. Why had she given him rebellious books to read? Now, this was the result. How many contradictions, how much confusion!

“And what of your mother’s plans for you?” Francis inquired pensively.

“Good God, she wants me to be happy, doesn’t she? Life is long and I have time for many things along its way, and I don’t need a better companion than Miriam. Mama cannot be prejudiced on this score.”

The other kept his peace. All of a sudden he recalled the lady of the house, her profoundly revealing beauty, her curious eyes, the peculiar intelligence of her simple, harmonious movements, the magic spell cast by her whole being, the flounces of her light fragrant dress - all the things he admired and worshipped in her, with a devotion that made him tremble and sigh and roused in him the sweet desire to weep... Yes, and her own history - the tale he had just heard... Such, then, was love, the tragic, sacred love of mature human beings. Love replete with a sadness and loneliness which even now - he divined - was hovering in the fragrance of the reseda-green room. And he was nearly revolted at the thought that this woman should now receive Miriam, a small, suburban grocer's daughter as her own daughter-in-law, take this girl into the calm, spiritual, withdrawn life that was hers, into this tranquil home. Why should she make this sacrifice, why?

Paul looked at his friend searchingly. He knew the other's thoughts even when he kept silent.

"I hope," he remarked dejectedly, "I hope you won't take sides against me in this matter."

"I won't."

Ahead of them, the bronze-yellow shade of the hanging lamp threw wide, warm-coloured stripes of light on to the steps of the terrace.

"How well they suit each other," exclaimed Paul, "Grieg's music and my mother!"

He sat down beside his friend on the sitting-room sofa and lit a cigarette. They inhaled the fragrance of the tea steaming in front of them on a small table. The lady of the house was opposite them, at the piano.

She was playing *Aase's Death*. She played with skill and with refined simplicity, and she put her whole personality into her playing - that is what a connoisseur would have said. But the young guest was not an expert. And in these minutes, the turbulent presentient nerves of this semi-barbarian felt far more than this: the music itself, the inexpressible, the mighty, chill, satisfying waves of life, desire and action - and all the bleeding, dreamy mystery on which the arrogance of the northern soul trampled so stubbornly and boastfully, so desperately. And from the depths of all the horrors and agonies, the madness and death, there emerged, gently and softly, as an ever reviving, tender and eternal accompaniment like the dew-fall of relenting tears, the melody, the world of fairy-tales and of beauty.

"Wonderful!" he thought. "How clear this language is, the language of tones!"

For the first time in his existence he let it penetrate his soul. Life had suddenly revealed a new value. He stared in front of him, spellbound, his hands cupped over his knees, and forced himself to think. But why? Why think just now?

As if he had cast off a hard, lifeless crust, under which life was stirring painfully ardent, colourful and poignant. Would it always be like this from now on?

"Why is mother playing this particular piece?" Paul asked, speaking mainly to himself and fingering the frills of a silk cushion.

She was sitting with her head slightly thrown back, and her girlishly slim, well-shaped shoulders swaying to the rhythm of the music. The pale rays of the two candles seemed to pass through her, imparting to her figure a translucent quality and sharply etching her against the dark background of the wall. Now and then, her curious eyes - at once radiant and veiled - looked at the two friends from under half-closed lids, circled by shadowy rings: the wonderful, wise, strong eyes of a wounded deer. Mysterious eyes, eyes that hurt. At which of the two was

she looking? The music had transformed her face, she seemed a different person, released and disturbing.

“How beautiful mother is today!” exclaimed Paul under his breath.

At which one of them was she looking? Francis unconsciously folded his hands in his lap, as if in prayer. He bent forward looking at her, intently, and sharp, painful, happy sparks shot through him. He knew beyond doubt now that something new had entered his life, had stolen up to him on soft noiseless feet, had slipped triumphantly and in deep earnest into his rational, simple and humble life. He was in love! What was to become of him? And yet, was this not the very essence, the quick of life? To fall on his knees before her, to die for her, how incredibly sweet it would be! Dully, metallically struck the hour: it might have been ten. There was a portrait on the wall above the clock - a vivacious masculine face, tense, attractive and restless, was leaning out of the frame. This was the man, the only one who had suited her, and everything was already fulfilled. Once more the piano brought together the gloomy, appeased motives of the ballad of death, the woman's cheeks were slightly flushed, perhaps from the physical exertion. A wild desire to cry surged higher and higher in the youth's breast, carrying on its waves all the stifled, burning emotions of childhood. What should he do, what could he do? Would it always be like this from now on? At the last chords, the woman turned her head. She smiled, a quick, warm and sad smile. Was it meant for him? It was the smile of forgiveness.

“I am going to stay with mummy for a while,” said Paul, as Francis was about to take his leave.

Francis got up. For a minute he was afraid and exultant at the thought that in an instant he would be holding her hand. Then this was over too. He went to his friend's room by himself, shaken and excited; it had all come so suddenly. He buried his head in the pillows, thinking he would cry, and he was glad to be alone. Yet he merely gave a series of deep, gasping sighs, whereupon he rose again and undressed with slow, meticulous movements in dreamy happiness. Then he turned towards the wall and fell into a sweet slumber at once.

His dream was virginal and filled with happy excitement. He saw her sitting on a riverbank in regal mourning dress, her lovely hands in heavy iron fetters. At the sight of these fetters a shudder shook his body, such as he had never experienced before. He hurried to her rescue on a speedy, clattering little ship, coming nearer with every moment, but she did not stretch her lovely, chained hands towards him. She set there mute and pale, looking at him through half-closed eyelids. Perhaps she was smiling.

He woke up with a start, his eyes wide open and already he was ashamed of his dream. Ashamed of having dreamt of a strange woman. If her son knew it! He started to turn around, and saw Paul in front of him.

Paul had his coat and hat on.

“Where are you going?” Francis asked, half frightened, and sat up in bed.

Paul shrugged his shoulders and sat down at the edge of the bed. He was nervous, his lips were trembling, as if he were close to crying.

“What is the matter? Where are you off to?”

“For the time being,” Paul laughed curtly, “to a most suitable place. They have fresh personnel at the ‘Bolero.’ You too will come to town with me, won't you?”

“Now? Are you mad? What are you talking about? What would your mother say?”



“Why, old boy, that’s just what she wants me to do, it seems. And keep this in mind: no woman is worth more than another, they’re all alike! Well, enough of that! Now I shall take life by the horns! *Wein, Weib und Gesang* - let come what may. Some day you’ll find me in the morgue or at the police-station, since mother expects me to make a career for myself.”

He turned on his heels and went off whistling and with much banging of doors. His excitement and bitterness drove him to sullen excess and he was quite beside himself. “At moments like this, he is capable of anything,” thought Francis, as he looked after his friend with sleep-laden eyes. He did not yet understand the whole situation, but reached for his suit instinctively. As he dressed, he heard doors softly opening, hushed steps and whispering outside. He met Paul’s mother on the veranda.

Theresa had just left the room, shutting the door from the outside, and the lady of the house was walking up and down. When she caught sight of him, she stopped short, leaned against the stove and waited for him.

“Poor boy,” she said, “we startled you!”

She tried to smile and talked as if there were only some small disorder in the household. But her voice and her whole body trembled with agitation. She was very pale, and there were traces of tears under the dark, lovely eyes. The youth looked into her face and in an instant took her part with the undivided partiality of his passionate heart, with the unrequited devotion of the faithful. He was close to hating his friend for having caused her pain with that insipid, artificial, freakish and immature love-affair of his and his childishly eccentric view of life; and he extended his hostility to the girl, the artful little bluestocking, who was probably full of ambition and designs. Francis felt capable of sacrificing every cause in the whole wide world, and his own young body and soul as well, if only he could save this woman a single tear.

“He has left, hasn’t he?” she asked with sweet intimacy, making no attempt to cloak her worry.

The boy nodded silently, his heart filled with bitterness against his friend. Paul was now wandering far away through the spring night, poetically and foolishly pleasing himself in the role of an outcast, all in the name of truth, that selfish and wicked truth of his. Francis, although he had never known his parents, now understood, from the depths of his soul, the tragic conflict between the generations: the inevitable day, when parents and children ceased to understand each other, and the sacrifices and worries, the labour and self-denial of a lifetime were all in vain. What a waste of treasures, what useless expenditure of goodness! For whom?

They were standing opposite each other - the woman’s supple figure leaning against the lukewarm tiles of the stove. Through a half-open window the cool night wafted the scent of the distant, damp, upturned fields. Neither of them spoke.

“If I could only be her son!” thought the youngster, frightened, as if the very wish might insult her. And already he began to hate this timid, pious idea. With fevered daring he turned on the portrait of the dead stranger. What was he to her? A fierce, bitter humiliation overcame him. His throat turned dry and burning, he almost choked, the silence was becoming intolerable, when suddenly he saw her closing her eyes slowly.

“What can I do?” he broke out, almost groaning. “Is there anything I can do?”

The woman opened her eyes and looked at him. At first she pressed her lips together and blushed a little. She must have noticed. His anguished, devout face, naive and wistful at once,

the great, dumb passion burning in the fine clouded, dark brown eyes, the shaking of the lean, bony shoulders, the trembling excitement and the vain effort to hide his emotion. She saw it all and she could not but understand that this was genuine love, the mature love of a man, silent, serious and determined; love without explanation, rhyme or reason. Beside her stood a man ready to offer her his whole being at the very moment when everything she had lived for was about to leave her. Once more, for the last time - love, youth. Was it of this that she was thinking?

“What can I do? I would do anything!” the boy kept on repeating stubbornly, without meaning - because he was in need of words that said nothing. Then a sigh escaped, a slight, involuntary sigh - her sigh. Sorrow, perhaps it was more than sorrow, lay in her humid eyes; her warm glance was charged with smouldering mysteries, with dreamily lurking dangers. She held out her right hand, gently and lithely nestling it softly into the rough palm of the hard, brown hand, compliantly, and left it there for a moment. A long moment. And that was all.

She withdrew her hand and let it drop. A minute passed, and nothing happened. Already she looked straight into his eyes, earnestly, with friendly, melancholy superiority.

“Yes,” she said, “if you want to do a good deed, please, go after him! Go and take care of him! He will listen to you. You will do this, won’t you?”

The youth bowed mutely. And he took his coat, humbly, miserably, cast out. He was yearning to go out into the fresh air, where he might stop somewhere, and, leaning against a wall, give vent to his tears at last.

1910

## LAJOS NAGY

(1883-1954)

Lajos Nagy was born in the little Hungarian village of Apostag on the Danube, of peasant stock. He acquired a university education, and while pursuing studies at the secondary school and subsequently at the university, he earned a living as private tutor; for a while, he had a clerical job. He wrote more than five hundred short stories - the first appearing in 1903 - and a few masterly novelettes. A two-volume autobiographical novel - a veritable encyclopaedia of twentieth-century Hungary - has remained unfinished. His principal works are: *Kiskunhalom*, *Budapest Nagykávéház* (Grand Café Budapest), and *A tanítvány* (The Disciple).

“To spit in the face of society is not Art, you know,” - that was the comment, Lajos Nagy tells us, the editor of a leading literary magazine made as he returned to the author one of his short stories. Yet Nagy remained loyal to this literary ideal: to give a faithful portrayal of the social realities. He entitled his autobiographical novel *A lázadó ember* (Rebellious Man); and the second volume: *A menekülő ember* (Fugitive Man). He was a fugitive from a world in which honesty was denied a place, and he rebelled against it, seeking refuge in dissatisfaction, an attitude which constitutes the vital element of all his work and provides the keynote to every one of his writings. He was dissatisfied with the world in which social injustice brought frustration to the poor and torment to the sensitive. Again and again his indignation was restated pithily; he would set forth the facts, reducing his comment to a minimum, thus allowing reality to fill art with its irrefutable force. He was a conscious socialist, but often censorship compelled him to seek the allegorical form for his revolutionary message.

After his death, one contemporary remembered him thus: “He was more than his mere self... His work fills no more than ten or twelve volumes. But through his work he has rendered such substantial assistance to life in the struggle for Good, has scored such a great victory, that he is still with us, still forming part of our existence.”

## AN AFTERNOON WITH MR. GRÜN, SOLICITOR

The office in which the clerks worked was a longish and rather cramped room. Its only window gave on a short and narrow street, consisting of three-and four-storey buildings. The office, situated as it was on the first floor of the house, was decidedly gloomy. Only on the brightest day was it possible to work there by daylight, and even then only in the morning and early afternoon hours. Otherwise the gas was kept burning constantly and a sickly yellow light filled the room in which, because it never received enough fresh air, there always lingered the stale smell of ink, dust and paper.

It was a quarter past three in the afternoon. All four clerks were seated at their desks, upon which lay sundry documents, and were engaged in conversation. It was their regular practice whenever the head of the firm was not in. They strewed their desks with papers, picked up their pens and talked. This custom - which had become practically compulsory in the offices of Mr. Grün, Solicitor - was only occasionally broken by Mr. Kerekes, a candidate at law. He was the most unsophisticated and hard-working of the four and, in the opinion of his colleagues, something of a 'climber.'

It was strange and unprecedented that the boss should have failed to turn up at the office by a quarter past three. It was not like him to be late, not like him at all. On the contrary, he usually came up from the café, where he took his post-prandial black coffee, as early as half past two, and got down instantly to work. His employees, arriving at about three o'clock, would find him already at his desk, busy at work. His desk stood facing the door that opened from the antechamber, and the boss, smoking his long-stemmed pipe, watched his clerks trooping in. They had to pass his room to reach their own office. If any one of them was five or ten minutes late, he would throw an odd, theatrical glance at the clock on the wall, never failing to impress the latecomer with the significance of his act. On such occasions he would wear a reproachful look, marked by a peculiar sadness, as if those few minutes of absenteeism caused him genuine pain, a feeling of betrayal, of having been cheated out of something.

That being his way, it was only natural that their principal's lateness puzzled the clerks and aroused their comments. Up to that point, talk had centred around some article in the newspaper. Mr. Steiner had broached the subject by asking his colleagues whether they had read it. It was he who usually introduced these political, literary or sociological topics, and he was therefore regarded by his colleagues as a bit of a wiseacre.

When the clock had stuck the quarter, Mr. Vadász, who had been quietly smoking his cigarette, spoke up.

"It's a quarter past three," he said, "and yet no sign of Mr. Grün."

"As a matter of fact, it's twenty-five minutes past," Mr. Steiner observed, "for that clock's always ten minutes slow."

"Why, it's sometimes as much as fifteen minutes behindhand," Mr. Kerekes added.

"That's to make us stay longer," Mr. Steiner said. "Part of the system, you know."

Mr. Kerekes frowned slightly. He was apparently struggling with a thought and pondering whether it would be right for him to express it. At last he said:

"That's not it. For while we do finish fifteen minutes past the hour, it's also true that we start at a quarter past. So Mr. Grün's not the better for it."

"No, of course not," said Mr. Vadász, and he and Mr. Steiner were quite ready to accept that view. But Mr. Gergely explained:

"Nonsense! Don't you believe it! Of course, the clock is slow because it's been put back by him, Grün" (he always dropped the "Mr." in referring to the solicitor) "does this, in order to squeeze another fifteen minutes' work out of us. For, you see, we come by the clocks outside; they are more or less accurate, which means that we arrive at three. But we leave by the clock in the office, that is to say, at a quarter past six. For when this one strikes six, it's already a quarter past by the clocks outside."

"That's a fact," the others agreed, smiling at this clear and sensible exposure of the trickery. For it was now easy to see, it was plain as daylight, that the clock was slow not because of any fault in its mechanism, but because it had been put back deliberately. If something had been wrong with it, it would after all have registered some irregularity, gaining or losing a few minutes every day. But no, the clock was always about ten or fifteen minutes slow, neither more nor less, day in day out. And it was just like Grün, anyway. The wonder would have been if it had been otherwise.

"He must be visiting his son," Mr. Steiner said. "The boy's getting worse again."

"He'll never get up from bed, that lad," said Mr. Vadász. "Once someone has begun to spit blood... And so young too! I don't believe he's twenty-four yet."

"I'm sorry for him, poor fellow," said Mr. Kerekes.

"I went to see him at the sanatorium the day before yesterday. Paid him a bedside-call," Mr. Steiner said. "I didn't intend to tell you about it, because he may not receive visitors. Forbidden to talk. Not a word. For six days now he's been lying in bed, on his back, with ice-bags on his chest and not allowed to move. Just fancy that - having to lie stock still all the time."

"The boy's illness is showing on his father. The boss has been very irritable lately."

"No wonder, with his son and his wife both laid up."

"I know for certain," Mr. Steiner continued, "that his illness has nothing to do with consumption, because I happened to see the laboratory report, which was lying on his bedside-table. We communicated in a rather odd way: he scribbled a few words with a pencil on a sheet of paper, and then I replied."

"Did you write down what you said, too?" asked Mr. Kerekes.

"What a silly idea, my dear fellow! Why, *I* am not forbidden to talk, I hope!"

They all laughed at the stupid question the candidate had asked. Mr. Steiner went on:

"The professor had said, he wrote, that his illness was very serious, but that he would recover. He had broken a blood vessel in his lungs during a fit of coughing, and that was why he had spat blood. As to the wife, she's got cancer... But we mustn't discuss that, mind you, or Mr. Grün may suspect that we know. I learned about it by overhearing a conversation between him and his brother-in-law when I was busy in the other room getting out the files for a distraint case. I could hear every blessed word. When she was suddenly taken ill a little while ago, the doctors diagnosed it as appendicitis and advised an operation. She was immediately taken to the hospital, where she was operated on the following day. Afterwards the professor told the boss the operation had been successful, but there was something else that worried him. He said he had found on her intestines a growth that might be malignant, and therefore another

operation was necessary. They were only waiting for her to recuperate a little. More than three inches of her intestines would have to be removed, he said."

"Terrible!" Mr. Kerekes said in a horrified tone.

Mr. Steiner went on:

"Imagine how much fortitude it takes for someone who is just beginning to recover from one serious operation, to have to submit to an even graver one."

"Terrible! Terrible!"

All of them were horrified.

"I don't think I could face it", Mr. Kerekes said.

"In that case you'd most certainly die," Mr. Gergely said.

"And in the most dreadful agony," added Mr. Steiner.

"And how about Mrs. Grün? Does she know what she has?" Mr. Vadász asked.

"Oh no! She doesn't," Mr. Steiner returned. "Can you imagine them telling her? Her husband wants it kept an absolute secret from her even after the operation. So we better not say a word about the whole affair. You never can tell how rumour spreads, and she might get wind of it..."

"She must be in a pretty bad state of mind, poor creature, undergoing one operation after the other," said Mr. Kerekes, shaking his head.

"Not worse than her husband," said Mr. Steiner. "She knows nothing about her son's illness either."

"A nice situation, this," Mr. Gergely maliciously remarked, "The way the Almighty plays about with the human race! Here he's aimed a chop at one family from two sides at once - mother and son both practically on their death-beds. Doubling his stakes - that's what he's doing, the old gentleman."

The remark, with its simile borrowed from the vocabulary of the race tracks, was greeted with general laughter. (The entire party - with the exception of Mr. Vadász - had attended the races on the previous Sunday.) Their hearty laughter was an expression of pure mirth although just a moment ago they had been genuinely horrified by what they had been discussing by human suffering, by fear of death. They had talked about it in such detail that their senses were assaulted by memories of sickness - the heavy smell of hospitals, the pallid faces with troubled and haunted eyes, the faint and tormented cries of pain - yet now a paltry joke had blown all this away, and they were laughing boisterously. They had, after all, only been talking about the unfamiliar sufferings of people who were strangers to them.

"It's an awkward situation, I dare say," said one of them.

"All this sickness in the family must cost him a pretty penny," Mr. Vadász observed. "I shouldn't be surprised if it ran into several thousand crowns."<sup>24</sup>

"That's about it," the others agreed.

"The professor says the boy must not work or study for a year or two," said Mr. Steiner, and went on: "He'll have to go and live at health resorts. As soon as he's able to rise and has

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<sup>24</sup> 2 crowns equalled 1 florin at the time.

recovered enough to travel, he'll have to leave for the Tatra Mountains. There he'll be living in the midst of pine forests, breathing the clean, dust-free mountain air. Then, in the winter, he'll go south somewhere, to Italy or Egypt. It'll take him about a year or two to make a full recovery."

"Quite an interesting journey!" exclaimed Mr. Gergely with a grin. "I would not mind going along myself."

"I for one would not care a fig for it!" the candidate said. "I'm content to stay and work here for fifty florins a month in good health rather than potter about in Egypt with T. B."

"And what if you did have T. B. and had to go on working with your diseased lungs in this dirty, stuffy room, without any sunlight? What'd you say then? Eh?" asked Mr. Gergely. "I'm sorry for the boss," he went on, "though he doesn't deserve any pity. And I'm genuinely sorry for his wife and son. He's always been a nice unassuming lad, but that's not to the point, anyway... What does count is that he's sick and suffering, so I'm sorry for him. And yet, when I see a wealthy person stricken with disease and know he can get everything that medical science has invented - well, then I'm filled with hatred, and I don't know for what or whom, maybe for the sick person himself. For, well, what would you do if you had T. B.? Can you tell me that?" This question was addressed to Mr. Kerekes.

"Heaven forbid!"

"You leave Heaven alone! What *would* you do if you had T. B.? Give me a straight answer!"

"I really don't know!"

"You don't, do you? Well, *I* do. You'd jolly well go right on doing the same thing you're doing now - you'd keep on your job here in town, earning your paltry fifty florins until you collapsed. At best you might leave the capital and go to work in a country lawyer's office, but when you grew very sick, you'd get the sack there just the same. *You* could never afford a trip to the Tatra Mountains and bask in the sun, take walks in pine forests and keep to a fattening diet. Then again *you* could never afford to spend the winter in Italy... You see, whenever such things come into my mind, I'm glad - so help me, I am glad! - that there *are* a few incurable diseases. Funny, isn't it? For example, a nice little cancer. If he's attacked by cancer, let the wealthy bloke consult the most famous doctors, let him even go to Egypt or to the Tatra, or to Kamchatka, or to hell - mighty little use that'll all be to him, he's going to kick the bucket like any poor devil. So there, at least, there's a little equality, a little justice for you. Therefore, I say, three cheers for good old Cancer and good old Valvular Deficiency and other such delicacies!"

These words had a peculiar effect upon the others, who could not help seeing in them a grain of truth, but at the same time felt them to be most inappropriate. Yet they were all impecunious young men. An embarrassed smile was their sole response.

"A pretty penny this Egyptian trip and all the trimmings are going to cost him," said Mr. Vadász, who seemed to show a passionate interest in the financial aspects of the matter. After musing a while, he continued:

"I suppose Mr. Grün has sized up the financial side of the whole business. Some measures he's taken seem to point that way."

"What do you mean?"

“Well, in a way, you know... He’s given instructions to go ahead with every case of distraint and all that. Why, this morning, he even dropped a hint that he might have to lay off one of us. As he said, the business of the firm could be managed by a staff of three.”

“Did he really make such a hint? Just what did he say?” asked Mr. Steiner, his voice and face registering, at one and the same time, great astonishment and complete confidence in the stability of his own position. He knew that he was a good worker, and so he could not be the one whom the boss would sack.

“Yes, just how did he put it?” Mr. Gergely also asked, not without some concern. He fixed his eyes, tense and inquiring, upon Mr. Vadász, anxious to get the whole purport of his statement, in order to be able to make conjectures as to who it might be. *He* was more directly concerned, for the boss had often grumbled about him.

At the moment it was pretty clear to all of them that the boss would lay off either Vadász or Gergely.

“This morning,” Mr. Vadász replied, “as I was collecting the petitions, he said, ‘Now all that doesn’t amount to very much, though it may seem to.’ Then he added, ‘As a matter of fact, that goes for this office as a whole. It looks like more than it really is - the income as well as the work, which could just as well be performed by a smaller staff.’ Then, after rummaging about on his desk for a while, he threw in, ‘As it jolly well will be. But I shall require more careful work than at present from the rest of you!’”

“Hush! He’s coming?” Mr. Steiner interrupted.

All fell silent and reached for the papers that were spread out before them. Quickly Mr. Vadász plunged his pen, which he had been holding all the time between his fingers, into the inkpot, and began to fill out a printed form which lay waiting in front of him.

The lawyer, after opening the outer door, crossed over to the open door that gave into the room where his clerks were sitting, stood still, and letting his eyes wander from man to man, waited for them to greet him before himself saying “Good afternoon.” Then he drew his hand across his brow and, with another rather searching and suspicious glance at the four men stooped over their papers, he turned and went to his desk. (He guessed that his clerks had been idling, firstly because he would not put it past them to begin with - indeed, he would have suspected even more hard-working people - and, secondly, because their very clumsiness gave them away: they did not realize that the uniformity of their shifty pottering was bound to arouse suspicion.)

The lawyer was a short, plump man with a fair beard, about fifty years old. His features often betrayed malice and his behaviour affection, but now his face was pale and expressed fatigue and suffering. Seating himself at his desk, he gazed abstractedly in front of him for some time as if he were considering what to do first. His eyes fell on the petitions of distraint which, filed in alphabetical order, lay near the edge of his desk. He drew the bundle towards him and checked whether the papers were arranged alphabetically according to the names of the defendants (the plaintiff being the same firm in each case). When he had come to the fifth petition, his face lit up with malicious joy. He called out:

“Mr. Vadász!”

The individual addressed entered and walked up to the lawyer’s desk.

Mr. Grün, casting a scornful glance at him, pointed at the fourth petition in the pile.

“Read that,” he said.



“Mór Bienenfeld.”

“And this one?” the lawyer said, pointing out the fifth paper.

“Imre Altschul.”

“Is this what you call alphabetical order?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but it’s not my work. Mr. Steiner has sorted them, sir.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” The lawyer was slightly embarrassed. “In that case, please consider my remark unsaid. Or, wait a minute!” He raised his voice high enough to be heard in the other room. “You can tell Mr. Steiner that he’d better repeat his alphabet, he seems to have forgotten it.”

Mr. Vadász left the room.

Mr. Grün was somewhat put out by his blunder, partly because it hurt his vanity, partly because it had happened with Mr. Vadász of all the clerks. Or rather he was nettled by not having been able to catch Vadász in the wrong and scold him for his carelessness. During the few moments it had taken Vadász to respond to his call, he had marshalled his thoughts as to what he was to tell the man. It would be something like this: “Now,” he would say to him, “do you call this a careful job? I don’t. I call it carelessness. True, it is but a trifling matter. But whoever is careless over trifles, will be careless when it comes to essentials. Why don’t you pay more attention? What if I had told you, ‘Here, take these two petitions and drop the first into the letter-box of the Fourth District Court and the second into that of the Fifth District Court,’ and you had mixed them up and done it the other way round? And suppose the two petitions were very important actions with fixed time-limits? And what shall we come to if you make just one such mistake every day? Or if each of my assistants make just one such mistake every day?” And so on and so forth. His mind had been full of reproaches of this kind, elaborated in every detail and sprinkled with stale sophisms, ready for use.

He had wanted to tell these things to Mr. Vadász. He had intended to tick off the clerk several times that very afternoon and the following morning; for the one whom he meant to lay off was Vadász. The sacking had been timed for tomorrow afternoon. He had reckoned out that he would have to dismiss one of the men to effect an immediate cut in his overhead expenses. His business could be carried on just as well with a staff of three assistants if he only kept a more watchful eye on them and supervised them more strictly, “for a man’s employees are his paid enemies.” He might even do a little more work himself. These steps were absolutely necessary; for the sickness of his wife and son was a tremendous burden upon his shoulders. He was passionately fond of them both, and it was his bounden duty to do everything in his power to save them and provide for their welfare. The boy would have to go and live, for years, at health resorts - and the very best health resorts at that - if he were to recover, poor boy.

Vadász would be the most judicious choice as the man to be laid off, because Steiner was a good worker, absolutely reliable too, and he needed the services of Kerekes, the candidate. As for Gergely, it would be difficult to dismiss him, for, although the fellow was lazy and whimsical, and even impudent enough to talk back, he had been recommended by a colleague to whom Mr. Grün was under obligation, and Gergely was a brainy chap as well. Vadász on the other hand, was not exactly prudent about office expenses and his reliability was questionable, although no doubt he was a fairly good worker. But Mr. Grün needed a pretext for sacking him, and so was determined to pick holes in Vadász’s work and find fault with him on any other ground.

At this moment someone began to play the piano in the house across the street; the kids in the apartment just opposite usually had their piano lessons at that time of the day. And in summer, when one had to keep the windows open, it was sheer agony to have to listen to that inept, halting thrumming, those never-ending, uneven scales.

It had often occurred to the lawyer - and he had sometimes told his employees - that it was quite odd... or perhaps not odd at all but natural, that whenever you heard music being played next door or across the way, it was invariably someone learning to play... If someone happened to strum the piano next door, he wasn't playing, he didn't even know yet how to play, but tortured the instrument in his efforts to learn. If someone happened to play the violin next door, you could bet your life that he wasn't *playing*, for he hadn't yet learned to play, but was desperately trying to learn by scraping away painfully on his patient fiddle. No, you could never hear any really good music in the neighbourhood, you just couldn't. Poor Mr. Grün had of late had to suffer every afternoon from the music lessons of four children. He was the only one to suffer, though, for the others delighted in his annoyance.

But perhaps it was all to the good that they heard nothing but children practising. Once in a while - as a good example, no doubt - the teacher would play a passage from an opera, always the same part. The sounds of the sad melodies would float into the small office - a most incongruous place for them! - filling its every nook and corner, and troubling the calm spirits of the four young men who sat bending over their files and books by gaslight. Slumbering desire stirred within them sluggishly, desire for something beyond their present drudgery, desire for Beauty, Pleasure and Heaven knows what. Their minds wandered, and they were invaded by sensuous thoughts. And this was regrettable, most regrettable. What was the sense of being reminded that there are finer things in this world than slacking away six or seven hours a day in a stuffy room, for thirty or forty or fifty florins a month, pale-cheeked and listless, lost in the tedium of a soulless job for the sake of another's profit? Far better under the circumstances - so help me! - to listen to school children pounding the piano next door and starting their scales over and over again... One could almost *hear* how agonizing they too were finding that scale-practising! Better by far that it should be so!

The lawyer rose from the chair by his desk, paced up and down the room a bit, then went in to his assistants and addressed them thus:

"Gentlemen, as you're probably aware, my wife and my son have for some time been seriously ill. My wife's had an operation, while my son has tuberculosis and will have to spend several years recuperating in a mild climate. This is making great demands on my purse. It will therefore be necessary to reduce office expenses. This also concerns you, to some degree, as you will be required to show even greater industry and precision in your work than up to now. Moreover, a more rigorous procedure will have to be resorted to, with regard to the defendants. I have been too considerate so far. And with all due respect to the principles of decency and humanitarianism, there are limits after all to their application. For instance, petitions of distraint must be filed forthwith on all non-appealable court decisions. Should anyone fail to pay an instalment in due time, a petition is to be filed without delay. There is no cause for surprise on your part... I have thought it opportune, gentlemen, to tell you these things for your guidance. I hope you will appreciate my position."

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

A tall, gaunt man with a moustache entered. He looked timidly about.

"I wish to see Mr. Maurice Grün, solicitor."

"I am he. What can I do for you?"

"Why, yes... of course... Coming in from the light, I didn't recognize you, sir... My name is Szemcsik, John Szemcsik. You'll remember, perhaps..."

"I do, indeed. You should have paid up yesterday, sir."

"I was only able to raise money this morning, and I thought one day would make no difference..."

"You are very wrong there, I'm afraid. The court has decided against you on your own recognition, and in line with its decision, you are required, as you are no doubt aware, to pay so and so much in interest and so and so much for the costs of the proceedings - I don't remember the exact sums by heart, but I shall consult the files presently. Mr. Vadász, please!... Anyway, you've been ordered to pay the sum within eight days. The eight days expired yesterday, and you're in default... Mr. Vadász, hand me the Drill vs. Szemcsik files, will you?"

"I've only managed to raise a little money today, sir. I've brought it along..."

"A *little* money! How much, pray? And you should have settled the *whole* account yesterday! As a matter of fact, I lodged a petition for distraint against you this morning."

"You did? Already?"

"Why, of course. You, sir, as I see from these papers, are a teacher..."

"That is so. I am a primary-school teacher."

"...and so, as an educated man, you're no doubt aware that when a legal decision comes into force - in the case of Defendant failing to meet his pecuniary obligations - a petition for distraint will be filed. Am I right?"

"But look, sir, ...I did tell you in the lobby after the court session that I desire to pay and that I certainly would pay although I might perhaps be a few days late and might not be able to pay the whole sum at once. And you, sir, did you not tell me that I could rest assured, a few days' delay would not matter?"

"I said nothing of the kind!" the lawyer replied in a firm, resolute voice, looking the other square in the face, grim and almost desperate.

The teacher had spoken the truth - the lawyer could distinctly remember it all; therefore the lawyer was now lying when he disavowed what he had said in the lobby. And yet he met the teacher's amazed, perplexed look with a hard expression of self-possession and determination such as only a sense of being in the right can give a man. He felt his lie to be a mere form, and essentially he was right. He was driven on by life itself and he had no choice but to fight it out with this poor, unhappy fellow. The teacher, still wearing that puzzled, perplexed expression, could only mumble, "But, sir, ...I ...I..."

"And I repeat that I never said that you impute to me. I have no recollection of it whatsoever."

The teacher now pulled himself together.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "I'm quite positive about it. I recall the very words. 'You can rest assured,' you said to me, 'a few days default will make no difference. Only mind that you pay in the end.' That's exactly what you said."

"And I repeat em-phat-i-cal-ly that I never said such a thing! Not that I know of! If I did say something, you must have misunderstood me and your memory deceives you... Let me add

that I don't usually bother about a default of a day or two, since petitions for distraint are filed, as a rule, only when a number have accumulated... I may have said something to that effect, but definitely not what you allege."

"But you did quite positively promise..."

"Ah, please! Let us put a stop to this! You're only wasting my time and yours," said the lawyer in growing irritation. He was getting decidedly angry at the teacher. What upset him most was that the teacher recalled what he had said word for word, thus making the whole affair even more embarrassing. He tried to settle the matter as quickly as possible and made up his mind to remain firm to the bitter end.

"How much are you prepared to pay now?"

"I've brought you fifty crowns, so..."

"Fifty crowns! Your debt, my dear sir, together with the cost of the petition for distraint amounts to a total of one hundred and forty-two crowns and sixty fillérs. You are offering no more than a third!"

"The remainder I shall settle on the first of the coming month, and on that of the next one."

The lawyer was glad to hear this. Now he could rest his case on formal logic, and he reacted with a triumphant laugh:

"Ha, ha! First you allege that I granted you a few days' respite, and now you claim several months! Then it was really quite unnecessary to recall the very words I'm supposed to have used." The lawyer's tone had become plainly sarcastic. "Well," he continued, "I cannot grant you so long a respite. Better forget about respites altogether. I shall have a distraint served upon you as soon as I receive the order. All I can tell you is that it may be four or five days before the order comes, so you have that much time for raising the money... I must say, I find it decidedly odd that you should try to adduce a delay of several days allegedly accorded by me."

The teacher preserved an embarrassed silence. He saw that he had been worsted, for power was on the lawyer's side, while on his there was nothing but poverty and impotence. At last he said: "I'm not holding you to any promise, for I may have misunderstood what you said on that occasion... I just remember it that way. But I do plead my poverty, sir. Right now I have no money. Nor am I in a position to raise any, whatever I do. But on the first of the next two months I will settle my debt from my salary, come what may. I beg you to consider my situation and not to make my position even more difficult that it already is."

This backing-out was all to the lawyer's liking. He saw that the case could now be handled according to the rules of diplomacy, a sphere in which he felt thoroughly at home.

"Ah yes!" he said. "Poverty! But, my dear sir, aren't we all poor? Have you ever seen a defendant who wasn't? Surely, I can't be expected to ease the lot of every person in need."

"But my dear Mr. Grün, I can also plead - and this you will admit, I trust - that you run no risk whatsoever by granting me a slight postponement."

"That's quite beside the point. Moreover, it is not true that I should run no risk by granting you a respite. Besides I've been instructed by my client to be strict, exacting and conscientious in transacting his business. You should have avoided getting into debt! Or you should have paid your instalments on time, once you had undertaken the commitment - then it would never have come to legal proceedings. I have my duties towards my client. Can't you understand?"

“But please, sir, there is such a thing as fairness.”

“Much less than you think. Why, you were hardly fair to yourself when you ran into debt, buying books on credit and assuming obligations far beyond your means.”

“I couldn’t possibly have foreseen these difficulties...”

“Ah, difficulties! Everyone brings up difficulties. Why, I’ve my own difficulties to cope with, and they’re worse than yours, I assure you.”

“I’ve never been in debt before, I assure you. I’ll be in a very awkward position if you have my furniture seized and my salary attached. I’d do anything only to be spared *that*. If only I could raise the money somewhere! If only I...”

The teacher’s voice had become altogether suppliant. He looked at the lawyer with faltering, faintly hopeful eyes. The face of his interlocutor expressed so much exhaustion, so much sadness that he felt there still was some hope. But the lawyer only said:

“There’s nothing I can do for you.”

“You see, this summer’s eaten up lots of money. My wife, she’s not very well, poor thing, and I’ve had to send her to my mother’s in the country. My two little girls have gone with her: they’re in need of a little fresh air too. One of them is recovering from scarlet fever which laid her low just before the summer holiday. And I’ve had other expenses as well.”

The lawyer pondered a little, pacing up to the door and back again. Then he halted in front of the teacher, and placing his hand upon the latter’s shoulder, looked him in the eyes with friendly affability, and addressed him in a tone of paternal goodwill:

“My dear fellow, I can understand your position perfectly well. I have to do with many people like you. You can rest assured - as I have already told you - that I am acting in your case within the limits of my possibilities. It’s not going to ruin you, at all events. I’m compelled to levy execution as a precautionary measure. Meanwhile you just go after that money - I’m sure you’ll manage to raise some. There’s always a way out, and I may not have to levy execution on you after all. And even if I do, it’s not as bad as all that: you’ll simply settle your debt afterwards. Of course, the cost’ll have increased a little. But those few extra crowns won’t knock you out, won’t even do your health any harm.”

By now, the teacher presented a heart-breaking appearance.

“...Now this is what you do,” the lawyer continued. “Pay me the fifty crowns, go quietly back home, and try your best to get the matter squared as soon as possible. Come, come, man, keep a cool head!”

A bitter smile appeared on the teacher’s face. The lawyer’s attitude bordered on the ridiculous, speaking as he did as if he had met the teacher’s every wish. The teacher produced a fifty-crown note. The lawyer sat down at his desk to write out a receipt.

While this scene was taking place between the lawyer and the teacher, the assistants in the adjoining room passed the time with little work and much talk, conducted in soft undertones. They overheard the whole conversation between their principal and the teacher, and accompanied it with their comments. When the lawyer sounded irritated for a while, Mr. Vadász observed to Mr. Steiner:

“This comes at a most ‘appropriate’ moment for me! The boss’ll be as mad as a hatter, just when I want to ask him for an advance.”

Mr. Steiner gave a yelp, which made both men titter irresistibly, despite all their efforts to stifle their mirth.

“You really intend to ask for an advance?”

“I do.”

“But as far as I know, you’ve already had an advance of twenty crowns.”

“That’s right. And now I’m going to ask him to advance me the other forty and another twenty crowns on my next month’s pay. I simply have to have sixty crowns.”

Mr. Steiner broke into fresh laughter and, leaning across to Messrs. Gergely and Kerekes, said:

“You hear that? Vadász is going to ask the boss for an advance on his next month’s pay. He wants to tap him for all of sixty crowns. Today of all days. You hear that?”

(It was at this point that the lawyer, in reply to the teacher’s words, “There is such a thing as fairness,” said, “Much less than you think.”)

Vadász’s intention produced general merriment, and even he could not keep himself from a half-hearted smile.

“And what if you’re the one he’s going to fire?”

“If I’m fired, I’m fired.”

“What do you need so much money for?”

“I just need it. And that at all costs. If I don’t get it, I’m done for.”

The tone in which he said this, conveyed its seriousness. Nevertheless, he kept on smiling. His colleagues stared at him, grinning and taken aback at the same time, perhaps also feeling a little sorry for him.

One might well feel sorry for Mr. Vadász on closer inspection. His features were so seedy, so genuinely those of a clerk, and now his constrained, not to say miserable smile revealed a set of large, yellow teeth, two of which had their crowns broken off. His hair was dishevelled to the point of impropriety, his clothing shabby and full of stains, and the whole figure seemed just to have been dug out of a dilapidated trunk in the lumber-room.

Perhaps his companions really felt some compassion for him, at any rate they said nothing more about his affairs. They fell silent and resumed their work.

After the teacher had left, the lawyer sank into a long meditation about him. He could not help thinking of what had happened with loathing and hatred. He felt like one struggling to his feet after a murderous fight, leaving his crushed opponent lying in the dust, but himself soiled, his hands blood-stained and his clothes tattered. That fight with the teacher had been disgusting! The bastard had been well armed, clad in the armour of Poverty and Dire Need, of Worry and Sickness, and wielding a tidy amount of Truth as his club!

The lawyer went into the other room. Once more he stopped at the door and again let his suspicious glance wander over his assistants. His face wrought into a forced, scornful smile, he evidently wished to drop a few sarcastic remarks about the teacher.

He knew that the clerks had overheard the whole scene, from which it was apparent that he *had* in fact granted a respite to the teacher, no matter how much his words sought to disguise it. The situation called for a little smoothing over.

“Ahem... that teacher!... A queer fish, isn't he?... Did you hear him? He claims I granted him a respite of several days, and now he comes here with fifty crowns on him - one third of his debt - and says he'll settle the remainder in two instalments in almost two months. That's what he calls a few days' respite. You heard it all, didn't you? I remember having told him something, but it was different, entirely different. And the poor fool comes here to tell me that he recalls the very words I said. Why, he didn't even recall my face! He didn't recognize me when he entered. He looked at me and asked for Mr. Maurice Grün, Solicitor, and when I told him he was speaking to him - you must have heard that - he said he hadn't recognized me, because he had come 'from the light!' As if the gaslight wasn't burning in here making this room brighter at this time of the day than the narrow streets outside! Well, he's a muddle-head, that's what he is. Poor blighter. I pity his kind... I know very well what I told him there in the lobby, but I didn't repeat it, for I didn't want to complicate things. It's no use arguing with a fellow like him. It was best to fix the matter the way I did. I'm truly sorry for people like him, but I can't do anything for them - I am, after all, a mere instrument, an agent of my client... If it were to me that he owed money, I would give him a respite - even for a year... And then his sort are always convinced that the lawyer's the villain in the piece, the lawyer's a bloodhound...”

He returned to his room and again began to pace up and down. Soon the clock struck six. He checked the time by his watch - it showed a quarter past six - and then called out to the clerks:

“Time, gentlemen! Call it a day.”

They were already preparing to leave.

Mr. Grün sat down at his desk and began to put his things away. The clerks took their hats. Mr. Vadász motioned them to go ahead, as he was staying behind. He started towards Mr. Grün's desk. The lawyer looked up at his clerk, and instantly his face registered a mixture of amazement and irony. He knew what was up. He understood only too well why Vadász had stayed behind, why the clerk was sidling up to him. Mr. Vadász's voice was veiled and feeble as he said:

“I - I have an exceptionally great favour to ask of you, sir. I'm in a very tight corner, and I absolutely have to have sixty crowns. I - I wonder if you could give me an advance of my salary for this month and another twenty crowns from my September salary.”

“Is that all? Aren't you overdoing it a bit?”

“This is an exceptional request, sir. I've never asked for such a big favour before. But now I'm in a fix.”

“Hm, in a fix, are you? You too? And what, if I may ask, is the cause of your fix? Have you been jilted by your sweetheart? You know very well that I never advance such large sums. It'd be against your own interests if I did. You and your colleagues get paid at the end of the month, as is the rule in every law office. If you fellows knew how to husband your salaries, you would never find yourselves in trouble. What'll you do next month?”

“It's for paying the rent that I need the money, sir. Today is the fourteenth of August, and we haven't yet paid our rent.”

“Haven't you paid your rent? I'll gladly believe that's what it's for, my dear fellow. But I can't pay other people's rent, can I? It's enough if I'm able to pay the rent on my own place. I pay my employees their salaries on time, as fixed in the contract - and I can't do more... Rent, indeed!... In the same way you or, let's say, Mr. Steiner, could come to me and say that besides the rent you need money for paying the monthly food bill, or for buying clothing, or 'our sofa's got worn through and needs a new cover,' or 'father is sick and has to be sent away

to the country,' or heaven knows what other excuse. In short, 'I want five hundred crowns, and will you please fork it out, sir!' Isn't that just about it?"

"I only need sixty crowns, sir. That's hardly a very large sum for you, sir, and I will attend to my work all the more conscientiously and diligently for it, I promise you. If it was only for myself, I would never have approached you, for it's most awkward for me, and I would never have risked a refusal. But it's for my parents, sir. We're about to be evicted... My father's out of work just now..."

"What is your father's trade?"

"He had a job as a shop attendant, but he's been sacked because of his age."

"How old is he?"

"Sixty-one."

"And have you no other possibility of raising money at such a critical time? Haven't you laid by a few florins for a rainy day, eh?"

"No, sir, we haven't. We've been hardly able to make both ends meet - to save money was out of the question. My father's been out of work for the last three months."

"And yet, in a situation like this, one always manages to dig up some money, one way or another. Surely you have some relatives or friends who will lend you what you need; or some object or other which you could put in hock?"

"Believe me, sir, there's no use trying to get a loan from a relative, not even two crowns. We already owe money to everyone who was willing to lend, and they won't give us any more. And we have taken to the pawnshop everything that could be pawned... Yesterday we had to renew two pledges - they're for three lottery tickets each. Here, I can show them to you. I'm ashamed to wear this suit, and I've got a better one, but that's been put up and we've no means of redeeming it..."

"Hm, hm!"

"We've done all we could, but haven't been able to raise any money. My mother's seen the landlord, but all in vain, he won't wait any longer. We haven't yet paid a penny for this quarter. The quarterly rent amounts to fifty florins. I'm only asking you for sixty crowns, sir. They're ready to accept the remainder on the first day of next month when my elder brother'll be sending home some money."

"You have a brother?"

"Yes, sir. He's a shop assistant."

"And doesn't he contribute to your household expenses?"

"We've used up all the money he gave us, and we had some debts to settle for last month too, so that there was nothing left to pay our rent from."

"Now why doesn't *he* ask his employer for an advance? Shopkeepers are in a better position to advance money, don't you think?"

"Not a chance of getting a loan there. My father's even done a very foolish thing. He took his silver watch, the only one he had, put it up the spout and got six florins on it, which he took to the races and of course lost down to the last penny."



“Ah well, if your father does things like that, he has only himself to blame. But, forgive me for saying so, that’s utterly childish! It’s... it’s... idiotic! If he’s like that, he doesn’t deserve to be helped at all.”

“Oh no, it’s not that way, sir. There’s a waiter living in the same house as we. He swore he could give my father the winning tips. My father had never attended the races before. He’s a very decent man... a very good man, my father...”

Here Vadász’s voice faltered, and a tear rolled down his cheek. He cast down his eyes and, harassed by uneasy and depressing emotions, stood there tongue-tied and embarrassed.

Now that Vadász had his eyes glued to the floor, the lawyer inspected him from top to toe. He was taken aback by the man’s neglected appearance, which he now noticed for the first time. Even his shoes were tattered!... The lawyer himself was already completely worn out. Anxiety over his sick wife and son, his numerous material and moral cares, and lately his clash with the teacher, had worn him down to the point where he could no longer be hard on the man now before him. He was gripped with an uneasy, painful feeling and experienced a compassion for Vadász so deep that he had a sensation of physical pain in his heart. He was poignantly moved by what he considered the young man’s extraordinary sensitivity concerning his father... He sank back wearily in his chair, and resting his arms upon his things, heaved a deep sigh.

“Ah well,” he said.

Then he took his memorandum-book, got out his wallet and said to the clerk:

“And how much is your rent?”

“I would appreciate sixty crowns, sir...”

“I asked what your rent was?”

“A hundred crowns, sir.”

“Here’s hundred crowns, as an advance.” And - like one who, after getting himself into a mess, no longer cared what came next, and was therefore ready to gamble - he continued without pausing to reflect:

“How long have you been in my employ?”

“Since the first of February.”

“February the first... So this is your seventh month. Well, beginning next month you’ll get a raise of ten crowns. So you can pay off your debts more quickly.”

“Thank you very much...”

Mr. Vadász bade him good evening, and left.

The lawyer was left alone. He rose from his desk, paced up and down a bit, then set down in an arm-chair. He set there, an exhausted, broken man, sunk into himself, a prey to his feelings. His pallid face looked more than usually white and sad and was criss-crossed by furrows that told a tale of hard struggles. His thoughts chased one another in confused and strange associations... He saw his son lying on the sanatorium bed, wan, motionless and silent, his face unshaved for days, his right hand resting on the blanket over his chest - a skinny, pale hand. Oh, how it hurt to see that hand!... And now this poor devil of a Vadász had knocked him off his feet... They come and come, the bastards - all of them poor and sick, falling upon him like a gang of robbers to strip him to the skin... It had been insane of him to do what he

did! Once a man is overwhelmed by suffering - the suffering of his loved ones - he becomes sick himself, his strength drained and his heart a pulp... And the vision of the sanatorium came back to him - the white room, with its white furnishings, everything white, even his son so very white as he lay there on his bed, with stubble on his chin, motionless and silent, his hand resting on the blanket. How sad, how emaciated that hand...

Suddenly a tune struck his ear. The piano teacher was playing. The music, sorrowful and warm, penetrated into his soul, filling it with a sense of colour, vastness and beauty... The melody flowed on slowly, a plaintive song of sorrow, simple, sound and deep - carried on tones of truth clear and resonant as though struck on some fabulous metal... And these sounds washed away the ugly, agonizing visions that had invaded his soul, and he was overcome by an unfamiliar sorrow, vast and infinite and yet soothing.

1910

## ANDOR GÁBOR

(1884-1953)

The course of his progress was one frequent among writers. He began with sarcastic comments on the smaller oddities of everyday life, gradually to attain to an advocacy of the truths of socialism. The keynote of his early works as a journalist, short-story writer and novelist, was one of scintillating humour and wit. The subjects of his cabaret turns and popular songs were the morals of the swiftly developing bourgeois Budapest, the cultural uncouthness and snobbery of the *nouveau riche*, the humiliations and the hapless, bleak fate of the poor. During the years of the First World War he turned against the madness of militarism, and advanced towards the pacifists, then the socialist movement. The highly educated young writer, who had translated the *Song of Roland* and *Mireio* into Hungarian, was an enthusiastic supporter of the two post-war revolutions who welcomed the proclamation of the Hungarian Republic of Councils of 1919 in rapturous poems.

During the period of the White Terror he was imprisoned and after his release he emigrated to Vienna. There he edited a paper, published volumes of verse, compiled a book of songs for the use of revolutionary workers, etc. As one of his critics put it, his poetry was in this phase enriched with the rawness of the medieval German peasant songs, the irony of Heine, the emotion of the poets of the French Commune, and the specific realism of the modern proletarian lyricists. He wrote mainly of conditions at home, of the oppression that was rampant in Hungary in the years following the fall of the Hungarian Republic of Councils, of the cruelty of the White Terror, and the havoc made of the cultural freedoms. In these works and particularly in the *Vienna Letters* which were to become famous, he deliberately declared himself a socialist.

From Vienna he went to Paris and thence to Berlin, finally in 1933 to emigrate to Moscow. Here he became one of the leaders of the International Organization of Revolutionary Authors, and editor of the Hungarian periodical *Új Hang* (New Voice). He increasingly devoted his art to the service of the anti-fascist struggle, castigating conditions in Hungary and Germany, and when the Second World War broke out, his articles and his appeals over Moscow Radio called upon the Hungarian soldiers who had been forced to go to the front, to fight fascism.

In 1945 he came home. He was editor of the popular satirical paper *Ludas Matyi* to the time of his death. It was now that the works he had written in emigration, first appeared in Hungary.

## BETTER TO DIE

János was tired, utterly tired. He woke up more exhausted than when he had gone to bed. He had been asleep for over hours, and throughout the night he had had to struggle with all sorts of women, of whom he had never known that he thirsted for their kisses. The air in the bunker was stale. The fire in the small stove, which the orderly appeared to have stoked at dawn, made the floor damp and the walls ooze. The smell in the small, confined space was like that inside a Budapest tram when it rains and the people in their wet clothes are crushed against one another, with musty vapours arising from them. János had a headache, and, as on so many occasions when he had woken up, he again had to find his bearings in the world around him and in the world at large. He had to find the lost thread of life which had last night escaped from his hands, in the course of the avalanche of dreams that preceded his sleep.

On mornings like this he always had a dim feeling that he now understood the cases which he had read about in books and papers of people who suddenly forgot their old lives and behaved like another person, bearing no relation to the previous one. Try as they might, the doctors could not stick together the two portions of their cloven lives. On such mornings he understood them, because it was so difficult to put himself back to where he had left off the night before. And it was all the harder, because he had, for a long time now, always wanted to awaken to a sequel that differed from what he had left behind when he went to sleep.

Let us see. Ah, yes, yes.

He was still János Takács, a lieutenant of the reserve, who had been taking part in the war for one and a half years now. Yes, this war had been going on for one and a half years, though he could not understand how. It was absolutely incomprehensible how it had come about and how it had failed to end on the very first day, when the first head was torn off by a shell. Nevertheless, there it was, and he was taking part in it, had even gone into it voluntarily because he had not wanted to stay at home. Not as though he had not felt at ease at home, but rather because he had not felt anything at all, he had become indifferent, ossified, and was so fed up with everything that he had wanted a change.

“A cha-ange,” he now yawned as he recalled how it had all happened, and remembered the Budapest poster with that same word, extended in the same yawning fashion. But he had not found the cha-ange, perhaps there was no such thing as a cha-ange in a man’s life, one could not cha-ange into someone else, and so it was all in vain...

People were all very stupid by then, or else it was he who had been over-sensitive of their stupidity. There was also an affair with a woman, which had taught him that women are even more worthless than men, and that the worst thing you can do is to have another person close, very close, by your side, if you cannot put up with other people in general, and even have considerable difficulty in putting up with yourself.

Then came the war, war without end. More direct contact than ever with very stupid people, for in civvies, once he had gone home, he could ward them off, but here he could not. Here he had to help some of the stupid people, since they had been entrusted to him, and had to obey what the rest commanded, because they were his superiors.

All the rubbish the others had managed to talk when the train first took them from flag-bedecked Pest to the Russo-Polish border! His ears still burned as he recollected the farrago of nonsense that his companions had bandied about throughout the day and half the night. Poor

lads, they had paid the penalty for it, for almost all had died. They might have done very well in life, each in his own honest, if limited, sphere of work, and their death was senseless, since if they had been a bit more clever, they needn't have died so soon. Bihari came to his mind, who had taken a musical stroll at night in front of the trenches and beyond the barbed wire at Bychodka. The Russians shot at him for quarter of an hour, while Bihari went on shouting:

“This way, Russky, this way! Take better aim, damn you!”

To the gipsy, who served in his platoon and followed behind him, playing his fiddle while his teeth chattered, he kept yelling encouragement:

“Don't be afraid, dark-skin! We're bullet-proof!”

Then he was hit in the forehead, swayed and fell like a sack of flour. The gipsy flopped down and crept back to the trench, where he was all of a shiver for three days, after the famous strolling concert of subaltern Bihari.

This took place during the advance in the Lublin area, when the lads had still wanted to keep charging the Russians with their bayonets, and this craze had led to the destruction of twice as many men as need necessarily have died. As soon as the guns had softened up the Russian trenches and the Russians started to move backwards (there were then no communication trenches from the first line to the second), János' men always leapt up, and without waiting for a command, went galloping after the Russians. He too, had to go along if he did not want them to think him a coward. It was no use ordering them to flop down and shoot at the Russians, who remained erect as they ran and would have offered an excellent target. The lads just went racing on, as though they were deaf, and only flopped down when the Russians had reached their second trenches and were firing from them, like a hailstorm. Then many of the men in János' platoon dropped never to rise again.

Only on one single occasion, on the approaches to Słupiec, was he able to stop his platoon during one of these senseless charges, and then only by engaging in a race with the young fellow running ahead of the rest. He was called Péter Muskó, a Hungarian from Transdanubia, and when János caught up with him, he tripped him up. Muskó went down and the others also ran slower, then flopped down at his command and did a good job of shooting at the enemy. They picked off about a hundred large black spots, running Russians, and the rest, who were in the second trench which János and his platoon approached carefully, with frequent commands to flop, surrendered. The whole incident cost no dead and no casualties, only Muskó had a swollen ankle for three days. János was recommended for a *Signum Laudis*. During the course of the day he praised his men, and in the evening he thoroughly loathed himself. He had praised them for having killed well and robbed a hundred mothers of their sons.

He had no more occasions after this for praising them, because the Lublin retreat had begun and János caught dysentery. He was transported to the rear on the narrow-gauge horse-drawn railway that had been built in the wake of the advancing army. János was wretched and seedy, and he had no clear recollection of how he had been brought to Budapest, where distinguished ladies nursed him in the hospital. He felt ashamed of himself before them and had no sense of gratitude whatever for their devotion. He would have liked to yell at them and tell them to leave him and his fellows alone to get over their repulsive disease, so that at least they should have no troubles beyond the torments of the body and not have to feel upset over the indignity to their masculine modesty three or four times a day. Later he became inured to it all, and treated the ladies as though they were his menial servants. There was a pale-faced young woman, who put up with this behaviour with saintly martyrdom, and he told her:

“My dear lady, don’t imagine that my coarseness is the whim of a man whom his disease has made irresponsible. I became ill on behalf of those who are at home. In return it should have been their duty to provide me with paid nurses and spare me this daily humiliation.”

The pale-faced young woman did not understand and continued to suffer. János went to a convalescent home. He kept paying visits to the town and met his old friends, who were even more boring and insufferable than they had been. The woman who had deceived him before the war, now wanted magnanimously to forgive him and approached János for the purpose of having the exhausted hero rest on her bosom.

János hurriedly took refuge in a provincial garnison, as a training officer. Here he was surrounded by malingerers, cowards and boasters.

He could not stand them and, after a total of four months spent in the rear, again exiled himself to the front.

Now he was here again, in a musty trench on the bank of the River San, opposite a hill by the name of Odryt on which the Russians lay entrenched. With a yawning soul, he was taking part in the industry of war, into whose machinery you had to pour able-bodied national servicemen for it to discharge them dead, wounded and diseased.

János pondered over whether he should wash and shave now? He had had no contact with water for at least three days, because the March mornings were chilly even in the heated bunker, and he hadn’t the energy to take off his shirt. Even now he decided only to shave, called to his orderly, Kuruc, and prepared his shaving kit. As he lathered his face with the shaving brush, then scraped away with the razor, he wondered when there would be an end to this senseless futility that floated past him in nebulous confusion and billowing boredom.

No - there would be no end. There was no sane reason why it should have started, and there was none for it to end.

\*

He donned his tunic, and noticed the greasy ribbon of the *Signum Laudis* on it. He recalled that his name had been submitted for promotion, out of turn, to the rank of senior lieutenant, because the other day...

János smiled.

He had not been able to go to sleep that night. On the rare occasions when human feelings arose in him and the desire for something more than eating, drinking and surviving till the morrow, he was usually unable to sleep. On that night too, at half past eleven, he left his bunker, lit his pipe and waited for the midnight patrol to return, so as to receive their report personally. Not that he was at all curious to hear what the indifferent report of the patrol would contain, but he thought that since he was awake anyway, they might as well let the subaltern sleep.

There was moonlight, and in places the snow was nice and white, though for the greater part it showed traces of dirty foot-marks. The cold had drawn thin skins over the waters of the San. Where there was no skin, the goose-flesh surface of the water glistened mutely in the moonlight. Beyond the water was the black mass of the Odryt, and occasionally a light breeze would whisper from the wood that covered its foot.

János gazed at the hill.

What business of his was the Odryt? What did the hill want of him? Why had it shoved its way into his life? It, and the other places that were also none of his concern.

All of a sudden the crest of the Odryt, where the Russian trenches were, began flashing. Tiny spots of light flared up, all in a row. Immediately after, the crackle of rifle-fire could also be heard. János quickly took cover. The Russians were firing at the position. Then the guns beyond the Odryt opened up. Lively firing started from the Hungarian positions on the left, too.

But he received no orders over the phone.

János did not know what to make of the firing. The bullets sputtered against the top of his bunker, and it all looked much as though the Russians were about to attack. But would they do that without artillery preparation?

A sergeant slithered into his dug-out from the right. He reported that twenty Russians had tried to cross the San, and it was to support them that the Russians had fired. Our men had noticed them and had fired on the twenty Russians, who had gone back.

Now the firing continued on both sides.

This hardly seemed probable. The Russians were not in the habit of choosing moonlit nights to cross rivers, and János himself had happened to see the San and that no one had tried to come across it. Never mind.

The telephone rang. János thought he would now find out the reason for the shooting. He was mistaken. It was only battalion headquarters inquiring what all the firing was about. János told them what the sergeant had said. Then continuing to hold the receiver in his hand, he heard the battalion forward his report to the regiment.

“Bravo,” said someone at regimental headquarters.

Next day János received a bottle of champagne from the colonel, accompanied by his praise. Later he learned that the day’s War Communiqué had contained a sentence saying:

“An enemy attempt to cross the River San in the region of the Odryt has been repulsed with heavy losses to the Russians.”

And he had been recommended for promotion out of turn.

Several weeks had gone by since then. Nothing had happened in the interval. Only the weather had improved as spring arrived, and there were more and more sick among the men. Yet the food was not bad, and their dug-outs had become more decent homes than previously when they had not believed that a trench like this might well be their dwelling-place for months on end. Discipline, too, was better. Ever since János had announced that any of the men who ate their emergency ration, though the field kitchens came up to the trench every day, would be punished by two smacks on the face instead of being sent on an extra patrol, there had only been one such offence. Vendel Rigó had eaten his rations. It was discovered in the course of an inspection, in the presence of the others. János was mortified in advance on account of the two smacks.

“Where are your rations?” he had asked Vendel, when he saw that he did not have them in his hand.

“I haven’t got them,” the lad answered quietly.

“Have you eaten them?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you do it?”

The lad gave no answer.

“Did you know the punishment for it?”

“Yes.”

“And yet you ate it?”

“I did.”

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

The lad made no reply.

“Didn’t you get your proper helping of the hot food?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Were you craving for your emergency rations?”

“No, sir.”

“Then why did you do it?”

Again the lad did not answer. János turned his back on him and thrust his hands in his pockets lest he should hit him unintentionally.

Vendel Rigó spoke again, but no longer stubbornly, nor like a soldier, but rather like a child.

“Sir... you see, sir... please don’t be angry, I ate them ’cause I was bored.”

János left the lad and went back to his cubicle. He lay down on the bed and pondered over how many times he would have had to eat his emergency rations, if they were really an antidote to boredom. He was desperately bored, not only on the uneventful days, but even when there was the greatest - the most bloody and the most hideous - activity.

It often occurred to him that beyond all the maimed and the blind that the war would produce, there would be a vast number of spiritual cripples - not lunatics, who no longer count as living people, but utterly apathetic men, in whom the slow fire of war would have burnt out all the zest of life. They would be apathetic bipeds, for whom nothing would matter, who would not intervene in the milling turmoil around them, but would look on with vacant eyes and irresponsible souls, while others acted.

\*

János had tea prepared for his breakfast, and ate bacon and bread with it. He munched it for a long time, because he knew that he had nothing to do all morning, once he had finished his business with the men.

He could have lifted the telephone receiver and listened to what the people on this sector of the front phoned to each other, but he did not do so, for what they usually talked about was neither interesting, nor amusing. He could also have read, but he did not read. Whenever he found something serious to read, he felt that it was out of place here, and that the sentences in the book would drive him mad.

The books he had read in peacetime all set out from and were built on the principle that man was man. All that now took place around him was based on the assumption that man was not man. Then why read them?



He laid out his postcards and his pencil to write home. He very carefully sharpened the pencil. Ever since his childhood he had enjoyed seeing the sharp knife carve a nice, smooth cone at the end of the pencil. This was why he had preferred writing in pencil, rather than ink. To be able to sharpen it.

Whom should he write to?

His parents? No. They wrote him too often as it was. Every week they pestered him with a new set of lamentations. Once it was that business was bad, then there was a bad outlook for the harvest, or else one of their relatives was ill. But János did not feel at all sorry on reading their complaints. When business was bad, he felt it would do no harm, they would manage to live off less at home. When there was a bad harvest, the people back home would eat corn bread, which would not be at all bad for them. If they would not even have corn bread, if they would have to go and graze, or if they wouldn't even have anywhere to graze, then perhaps everything might be different. But as it was?... And the health and diseases of his relatives were no concern of his. Those who were at home, could afford to be ill. They would be cured. And if they were not cured, they would die a hero's death. One man more or less could not be allowed to count now.

So he did not write either to his parents or his relatives.

He tried to run through his acquaintances in Budapest, wondering to whom he could write.

He sought for just one person who would really be interested in what was up with him. He could not think of a single one. If he were to write to his chief at the office, he would think it was a reminder to send János' pay to his parents punctually at the beginning of the month. His colleagues had become used to arranging for their promotions without considering him. His not being at home was all the better for them. The pile of work which he had seen to now provided something for each of them to fuss about and to make themselves indispensable with. János was convinced that the people back there would now be glad if he did not return. Of course, if the war had only lasted a few months, everyone would have been pleased to see him again. But by now they were haggling over his desk, and even if they were decent people, the reappearance of János would be contrary to their interests...

He put the pencil aside.

He would not write to anyone.

\*

He went over to the neighbouring platoon.

There was company there, and they were playing cards. They were having a game of macao, and Lieutenant Haller, who sat behind Lieutenant Sóvágó, and had just lost on Sóvágó's cards, was red in the face as he said:

"Listen, Franci, if we weren't where we are, I'd give you a piece of my mind. A decent chap wouldn't stop at four when another man's put a stake on his hand."

Sóvágó replied curtly:

"You shouldn't have. I didn't ask you to. Go and bet on Kovács."

"I bet on whomever I like."

"I stop at as much as pleases me."

"By all means."

“By all means.”

And they looked at each other, furious.

János' stomach turned.

“Why are you playing cards?” he asked.

“Get to hell with your sour philosophies!” said Kovács.

“Why are you so rude to me?” inquired János meekly.

“Because I can't stand you,” answered Kovács frankly.

“Five Pengős!” said Sóvágó, announcing the stake. “I say János,” he added, “there'll be something up tonight.”

“What'll be up?”

“We're going to attack. I heard over the phone that the artillery were given instructions to begin pounding the Odryt. - Nine!” said Sóvágó, slamming down his card.

“Why didn't you tell me this time to stake on your hand,” lamented Haller.

János went back to his platoon. There had been a phone call for him. He reported and received his orders.

At three o'clock that night, three companies would cross the San and capture the Black Peak, south of reference 605. At four in the morning, a further seven companies would cross the bridge that was to be built in the meanwhile and occupy 605 and maybe Smolnik. At the same time, the regulars on the left would occupy 628 and Trohanice.

“Yes, yes,” said János, but he was not really paying much attention. As he absent-mindedly held the receiver in his hand, he heard Kriszháber report sick and Székely handing over his command. That was the usual thing before an operation.

János told his men to draw at least three days' tinned rations and to lie down at six that evening, so that they should get enough sleep before the attack.

The guns were in action by now. But not too violently. Nor did they concentrate their fire on any single spot lest they betray the intended attack.

There were three more occasions in the course of the afternoon when the guns started roaring. Then they stopped, so as to let things look as though they had just been doing some ranging.

In the afternoon, Kovács came over to János and asked him to take over the task with which he had been entrusted.

“They phoned me to say that I of all people should find a ford across the water. But you, my friend, are far better at reading the map; besides, I did pretty badly this morning and I'd like to get my money back from Sóvágó. Do it for me, old boy, you've got time on your hands anyway. Then tell me, and I'll report to the battalion that the ford's all right. It'll be very obliging of you.”

János undertook to do it.

\*

After dark, János went out among the men, the whole length of the trench, to check on whether they had obeyed his orders. As he said a word or two to some of them, he kept wondering which of the men he would never be able to speak to again, because the telephone

message would spell death to them. But the lads were all alike. They were all prepared for death, and he did not find a single one among them who, steeled by a sort of secure premonition, would gaily shout “never say die.” Several said that it was impossible to capture the Black Peak, because by the time the company reached the top, there would not be a single live man left. But it was obvious that they would all nevertheless have a go at it, and try to redeem death with maybe a lesser wound...

His inspection completed, János crept out to the San in search of the ford. He had previously found out from the map that a couple of hundred yards above their position the water, which was not too deep anywhere, was rendered even shallower by a small island.

Black spring rain clouds had floated over the sky all day, and it was already pitch dark. A wind was blowing too, and even if there had been noise from either the Hungarian trenches or the Russian terrain opposite, nothing could have been heard.

By now, János had reached the marshy part and made his squishy way to a willow stump. He sat down on it to take off his shoes and trousers and wade at least as far as the little island. It did not for a moment occur to him that he might catch cold or that the icy water would be unpleasant. Holding his shoes and trousers in his hand, he carefully set off across the river. There were slimy stones on the bottom and they were certain to cause the men-trouble, because those who fell and struggled, might well drown even in this much water. He bruised his legs two or three times before he reached the islet.

There he again sat down on a tree stump, listened and pondered over the fact that he was now sitting between the two fronts, in pitch darkness, on a small no man’s island, and was not afraid.

In the past he had been afraid both of the dark, and of deserted places.

For his nerves had awaited something unexpected in the dark. Maybe where there was nobody, someone would suddenly say something... or touch him. That would be terrible... And it was true that there were no ghosts and that the dead did not live... this was true, but it was not certain. Not so certain as to rule out the possibility of some old acquaintance, long dead, appearing before him at the midnight hour. For instance Viktor Krompach, with whom he had been in the same form for eight years at secondary school, and who had been the second best scholar after János. Krompach had studied an awful lot, and he knew everything, everything, more than the masters, more indeed than anyone needs to know, and he had died a few months after leaving school. He was the only dead person János had seen till then, till the age of seventeen. And then, as he looked at the dead face of Viktor Krompach, he had seen no difference between such a dead man and a live person. He felt as though it was just a conspiracy of the others, and that Viktor Krompach could have his say if he wanted to. As soon as he did want to, he would have his say. He would not be able to stand having learned so much uselessly. Once he had had a rest and gained enough strength to wish it, he would rebel and want to make use of his knowledge and he would come back to live.

Up to the beginning of the war, János had always expected to meet Viktor Krompach.

But during the war he had seen so many dead and knew of so many more that even his inner convictions had changed. This vast number of people could not come back.

And he now also had a different feeling about the unexpected. In war, that which comes always approaches in an unexpected manner, from afar, invisibly. And it all stems from people. Where there are no people, there can be nothing unexpected. He felt the darkness to be a void and was not afraid.

No, not even here, where the wind filled the air with sighs and painful sounds. Nature only sighs, but has no pain. Man is all pain, and does not even sigh.

He returned across the water, dried himself on the inside of his greatcoat and put on his trousers and boots so as not to look ludicrous when he came to the dug-out.

He telephoned to the other two companies and told them where the ford was, set his alarm-clock for half past two, and lay down to sleep. He slept soundly, till the clock's ringing woke him.

\*

When he went out among the men, a great white beam of light was gliding about the sky. But the source of the light was not on the Odryt. The Russians were operating a large searchlight from their rear positions. This would not prevent the launching of the attack.

The men swallowed a mouthful of spirits each, and followed János. Here and there some of them swore quietly, but the march nevertheless took place in sufficient silence to keep the Russians on the opposite bank from hearing the noise.

Before they reached the water, János again cautioned all his men not to shout if any of them slipped. Then he himself entered the water, this time in boots and trousers. Half way to the small island, where the stones were most slippery, he stopped and waited for the men to file past him.

From the little island he again waded into the water towards the opposite bank. Here, however, where he had not checked the water in the afternoon, it was deeper than he had thought. Only now did it occur to him that the river must, of course, be deeper at the bend. There where he stopped in it, the water reached up to his waist.

Two of his men foundered, and if he had not pulled them out by their necks, the weight of their knapsacks and rifles would undoubtedly have dragged them down, and they would have drunk themselves half dead with the water, before clambering out.

On the opposite bank he quietly assembled his platoon. He waited for the men who had been detailed from the other two companies also to come. But no one came. Apparently they had not found the ford. Or maybe they had crossed somewhere else.

Silently they set out towards the Odryt. The foot of the hill was covered by a wood, through which they had to pass unnoticed. Beyond, they would have to climb the steep part with a hurrah.

In the wood, the men stumbled over roots and high molehills but they managed to get quietly to the edge of the wood, from where there were no more than three hundred paces to go, up a grassy slope, to the top of the Odryt.

The Russians did not move, and János thought it would be best to do without the hurrah - perhaps they could get right up to the trench in silence.

The Russians seemed to be asleep. He sent his men ahead and himself stayed behind. Not for cowardice. He knew why.

When they were only a hundred paces from the ridge, there was a shot from above.

"Damn!" someone said.

The shot had found its mark.

Rapid fire commenced from above.

“Now hurrah, now hurrah!” shouted János. “And double, as hard as you can!”

But three lads just in front of him turned round and came backward.

“Hey, you,” said János to them, “what are you doing?”

“They’re shooting,” one of the men answered.

“Yell hurrah and run forwards, if you know what’s good for you!” shouted János.

All his lads ran uphill groaning. There was a hoarse hurrah, bullets whizzed, some of the men rolled over sideways, others staggered back.

The hurrah became stronger as the front rank reached the ridge. The barbed-wire entanglement was open, the *chevaux de frise* having been cast aside. The Russians evidently had not particularly expected an attack. There was confused shouting at the crest, and a few more shots were fired. Then János too, reached the top.

You could hardly see anything in the dark. The Russians had no idea what had happened, and those in the trench surrendered.

“How many of you are there?” shouted János in Slovakian.

“Those who are alive, shout hopp-hopp!”

The “hopp-hopp” ran along the trench. There were twenty-seven Russians, the rest had fled by way of a communication trench. They thought superior forces were facing them.

The night became noisier. There was shooting to the right and to the left, and the guns also sounded on either side of the San, but János could not fathom what was going on.

He, at any rate, had done his job, so he went along the Russian trench and found the officer’s cubicle. It was more comfortable than his had been down there, across the San. It was more friendly, because here, at the top of the hill, the trench was not damp. There was also a wide couch in the dug-out. János ordered that the men were not to sleep till dawn came. He himself lay down on the couch and had all the blankets and bedspreads that he found scattered about the bunker, piled on top of himself. Wet from the waist downward, he went to sleep.

It was eight o’clock in the morning when he woke. Some soldiers were coming up the slope, from the direction of the San. They dragged a telephone wire behind them.

János was given a telephone and began gathering information.

What had happened was that he alone had crossed the San with his soldiers. The regiment had not come across the bridge, because the bridge had not been built. The pioneers had been fired at and had stopped work. That was what the shooting on the right had been about, at dawn. The regulars had not captured point 628, because they had gotten into shrapnel fire while still on the other side of the San. That had been the shooting on the left.

János received congratulations from the other side, and was told to hold the peak till the coming night, when everything that was to have happened the previous night would take place.

János knew this to be impossible, for the Russians would begin shelling the position as soon as they found out that only the peak of the Odryt was in enemy hands - even if they did not know how small the occupying force was. True, he had his men, because he had only lost two dead and six wounded on the way up the Odryt, but, on the one hand, he could not keep them there under concentrated gunfire, and, on the other, a possible Russian attack would wipe out the whole platoon or land them in captivity.

Nevertheless, he did not reason with them over the phone. He acknowledged the order and waited.

The gunfire began at half past nine. The shells groped their way up the slope of the Odryt.

János phoned for fire on the Russian batteries. He was unable to get it, because the Russian guns that were shelling the crest of the Odryt were out of our gun range.

The Russians began to find their range. Their shells landed ahead of the trench and behind it. Then in the trench itself. The very first claimed three dead. In this unlucky situation János' platoon, with its few men, had the luck of being so sparsely distributed in the long trench that there was only one lad every ten paces or so.

Even so, the Odryt was a veritable slaughter-house.

János knew that by the time the order to withdraw came, he would only be able to set out with half his complement.

Meanwhile a Russian airman also flew over them. He obviously wanted to find out whether anything was being done beyond the San to help our outpost at the top of the Odryt. But he could not have seen anything, because, as János knew from the phone, nothing was being done.

A Russian charge could be expected at any moment, but the Russians did not come.

As night fell, permission came for the platoon to withdraw.

"Just in time," said János to himself.

By now the Russians were shelling not only the trench, but also the slope of the Odryt down which they would have to descend to reach the San.

They bound the Russian prisoners' hands behind their backs and set off downhill with them. The wounded stayed behind in the trench.

At first the retreat was slow. Later the bursts of shrapnel began to illuminate the slope and the men started running to get down faster to the little wood. János did not try to stop them. Why not let those who could save their skins?

He stayed behind and reached the edge of the wood alone. He was sure the men would find their way back to where they had started at dawn, even without the ford.

Shells thumped down in the wood, and made an ugly racket. But the wood was large, a man small, and János was not worried about getting hurt.

He was quite surprised when a moment later, he heard a whizz and a crackling, flew two or three paces, and found himself lying prone at the foot of a tree.

"Have I really been hit?"

He was wounded. It must have been something to do with his legs, because he could hardly move from the waist down. He felt no pain and began to explore downwards with his hands. His left leg below the thigh was all bloody. The shell must have blasted his knee.

The wood was still under fire, and János was amazed how precisely he could still observe everything. Then the firing ceased. It was quiet and János started thinking.

He had the dismal feeling of not being able to appreciate the full importance of this moment. Just as, since the very beginning of the war, he had kept a check on himself and found himself incapable of absorbing anything of the greatness of the times he was living in. The war, as a

form of expression, as a word, had meant something great, but as soon as he was in its midst, János saw that even the war was not great and that it was just as small and paltry as anything else that men do. Only it was even uglier and more grotesque than the usual run of man's ugly and grotesque activities. He always had a feeling that war, as an experience, was not worth the sudden end, or the shortening, or even the dislocation of the life of so much as a single man.

Let alone so many hundreds of thousands.

In Budapest, when he was in a hurry because of some futile reason or other, he would jump on to a moving tram. After leaping he would usually recall that if his jump had not been successful, he might have landed under the tram and lost his leg, and then this incidental jump, this passing moment, would all of a sudden have become a highly important turning point in his life.

A new scale of time would begin, in which events would be divided according to whether they had happened before jumping on the tram, or after. A new date would be inserted between the hour of his birth and of his death - the moment when, for the sake of a theatre ticket, or even less, he had jumped onto the tram.

He had this same feeling about the great dates of human history. He did not believe that events necessarily happened at a set date in a set way, as and where they did happen. It could all have been very different. And this made the whole of history so uncertain, so disjointed and valueless.

This wound, for instance...

Here he was, lying on his back in a forest in the evening, with his leg shot off.

Yet he could find nothing peculiar either in the fact that he was lying alone in a strange wood, nor in that his leg had been torn apart by a shell. It might well have happened earlier and might also have happened later.

"This was the moment when I took a clumsy leap towards the tram. And, this time too, for some futile reason. What was it I wanted to do? To get back to the San. What for? Why do people move backwards and forwards in this war? Why are so many deaths involved in each move? When we went up the Odryt two of my men died; while we were up there, several more; as we came down, several more again. Senseless changes of position... People should stay where they are, that's the best idea. For me, for instance, this is now the best place... If only my wound won't hurt, then it'll be best to stay here."

János waited for the desire to well up in him to leave this wood, to go back among his comrades on the opposite bank, and beyond them to non-belligerent climes, among non-military people. But as he lay there, and his whole body began to go numb, the desire just would not come.

"The instinct of self-preservation," said János almost sarcastically to himself. "Where are you, instinct of self-preservation? Why don't you say something? Tempt me, or else I'll stay here, I'll croak in this mouldy wood, where I need never have come. Though once I'm here, it'll be no worse as a deathbed than it would have been as a cradle or a bridal couch. If my mother had happened to be here, then she might accidentally well have given birth to me here. If I was not so terribly occupied with this serious business of ours that we call war, I might well have brought a girl out here and made love to her. But that is not what I'm doing... I'm merely dying on this tree-root here..."

János noted that, though the damp woodland air was chilly, he did not feel cold.

“I seem to have fever... That’s when I’m usually so sluggish and contented. Never mind. Even as a child I used to like having fever. It was good. Warm. And it puts you to sleep... The sheet, the pillow, the eider-down, are all hot, but they don’t burn your body. Old doctor Ungár comes along and orders a vinegar compress, which has a sour smell, and is completely cold. Afterwards, it’s all the more pleasant to cuddle back into your fever...”

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From behind the tree under which János lay, Viktor Krompach stepped out.

“Hello,” he said quietly to János.

“Viktor!” said János. “How is it that I can recognize you in the dark here?”

“The point is not whether it is dark but whether one can see. What’s up with you?”

“Nothing. I’ve been wounded.”

“Well, why did you come here?”

“I don’t know, Viktor, old boy, I don’t know... I don’t understand the whole business... I went home to learn the crystallography lesson, for I was two lessons behind; but I had a headache. I thought I’d take a stroll in the park, it’s lilac time you know, I like the smell, and I came out here to the cemetery, and here all of a sudden... it turns out that there’s a war on, for the Great Powers have declared one, and they’ve taken a shot at me... It was Argentina or Orgentina<sup>25</sup> ... yes, from behind the lilac bush. Who would have thought it, Viktor, old boy?”

“And what are you going to do now?”

“They’ve sent for doctor Ungár. I’ll probably have to gargle.”

“That’s bad. I don’t like alumina.”

“And what about you, Viktor? I haven’t seen you for ages. Is it true that you died?”

“I’ve heard say so myself. But I don’t think it’s true.”

“It isn’t, is it? I said it wasn’t. But why didn’t you say so, when I was there?”

“Where?”

“At your funeral.”

“Because I was tired. So I preferred not to force the point. That frightful lot of homework, all that free-hand and geometrical drawing, and the stuff that had to be learned by heart. Three pages of history, two of Hungarian literature, always a whole biography for German... I was tired. So I let it be.”

Krompach sat down beside János. Nothing about him had changed since. János asked him:

“What are you going to do when the war’s over?”

“I’ll go to a university. I’ll become an engineer and take over my dad’s office.”

“Is your dad alive as well?”

“Yes. He is. Everyone’s alive. You needn’t bother about people dying. Now I’m going to stay here with you János and nurse you. Say: Aah!”

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<sup>25</sup> *Orgona* means lilac in Hungarian.



“Aah,” said János, and opened his mouth so wide, the tears welled up in his eyes. And through his tears he saw that Krompach’s place had been taken by someone else, a gentle-faced, charming, blonde woman.

A wave of heat, even more intense than before, suddenly ran through János. His heart began to pound very swiftly:

“Mother, mummy!” he shouted, and tried to rise from his pillow to kiss his mother.

But he fell back.

“János, my little son,” said his mother and stroked János’ face.

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The soft words still rang in János’ ears when he came to.

He now noticed the branches over his head. A milky light was glistening between them. The moon was shining, but its rays could not penetrate through the woods.

János felt a bitter taste in his mouth, and his head was dizzy. His heart nearly burst, it was throbbing so hard. And it hurt. It was from that voice that it hurt. When had he last heard his mother speak to him like that? It must have been some thirty years ago. When his mother had been just such a gentle, lovely, soft-voiced woman.

Now she was a wrinkled, grumpy old woman, gout-ridden and stout.

And there was a war on. And János’ leg had been shot off. Moreover, he felt cold now.

This shot in the leg was poor luck. It would have been better to have been hit in the head, that would have done for him at one go. Of course it would have been better still if this idiotic world had not come to such a pass that people got their legs shot off. But that couldn’t be helped now.

Yet you could always live with one leg. If, indeed, you could live at all. Or had to. But can you? Do you have to? Is it worth while even with two legs? Now that he was no longer fired by his fever, his situation, the world and he himself had again become so very empty and insignificant.

His mind’s eye once more swiftly scanned his life, as it had done so many times during this war. There was nothing anywhere that was dear to him, that beckoned to him.

Yes! If one could be free! Free of all ties and obligations; free of going back to the hospital, and thence back into the life that was, to the office, to neediness, to indifferent, unsavoury days. If one had the world placed before one, to choose from, and to do what one liked with it. Then it would be worth while to try and stand up, to drag oneself down to the water, to be cured, and to start it all over again.

But as things were?

János racked his brains to try and remember something that might call him back. He looked for some dish he would have liked once more to eat, from a kiss whose flavour would make his parched mouth tingle, a word that would ring in his ears.

But there were none. There was nothing.

Even if he did not think about having one of his legs cut off, a prospect that filled him with loathing for himself... Unwrapping his amputated leg as he went to bed at night... No, that was something he must not even think of. Just to think of going home, of remaining whole, and of

hearing for years to come of war, war, war. And people who had always been wicked, stupid, and boring, would be talking twaddle around him. What had happened since had not made them better or more intelligent or more amusing.

Ah, drop it! Here was the occasion, he had received his invitation. Now he could go to where he had often prepared to go, to the place where once you arrive, you are nowhere.

Suddenly he felt a terrible wave of pain down there in his leg, and, putting his hand there, he felt something hot and sticky. It was blood.

It became lighter every moment. Why was it trying to be day-time again? What a stubborn instinct of the world, always to want to renew itself.

“An intermission,” said János to himself. “I have to close the shop, for it has been grey and dull. I’ve been bored there myself, and the rest haven’t even noticed my being there. Well, I’m not. And I wasn’t beforehand, either. I remember my father used to tell stories in which I played no part, because I had not yet been born. And I never felt hurt at not having taken part in what happened before me. Why should it hurt me not to be a part of events after this.

“I shall remain here, and they won’t even bury me. There’ll be no fuss about my disappearance...”

Before, as often as he thought of death - and he frequently thought of it - he always got annoyed when he imagined his own funeral. And yet he always imagined it, and could never put a full stop after his last breath.

They would come and discover that he was dead, they would show consternation and pretend that there was something extraordinary about a man dying, they would behave as though they could not acquiesce in the fact. Yet, it was not true, for everyone acquiesces in the other man’s death. Those who invented immortality always did so only for themselves.

Then they would put him in a coffin and perform ceremonies around him, and instead of immediately removing him from among themselves, they would keep him there a while and invite guests, as though it were a birth or a wedding. They would hire a priest, who would talk about him though he didn’t know a thing about him, and for whom it made no difference whether there was anyone in the coffin or not. He would say the same if there were stones between the boards.

And people would squeeze each other’s hands and mumble all sorts of sentences they do not feel, but which would be unnecessary even if those who said them actually did feel them.

For at the end of every funeral those who are alive, go home and have dinner or supper - they go on living, for only a live man is a live man’s friend, and a dead man is neither the son, nor the father, nor the relative of anybody. He is just a dead man.

János had always been vexed at the sight of people who obviously know all these things as well as he, engaging in false pretences and doing other than what their instincts would tell them to do.

But now there would be no funeral.

There would be nothing at all.

He took out his wallet, in which there were all sorts of papers, letters and personal documents.

He tore the papers up separately, into tiny bits, so that even if they did find him, they should not know whom they were burying.

And even if they did read his name, what would it mean to them?

Who is János Takács, once he is dead? After all, he was a nobody even while he was living.

What a superfluous luxury it is to give everyone a name. A name belongs as little to a person, as it does to a hill, a lake, a river, or a wood. If men have nevertheless given the latter names, the only sense in it is that others who come that way later should find their bearings. Hills, lakes, rivers, woods always stay where they have been, but a person goes away and of a million named people only one does have a name, the rest don't, for all the vain efforts of the birth registers.

"Oh, if only I could have become somebody! Then it would be worth while to stay alive, but I was a nobody, a small dot in a large drawing that is of dubious meaning itself. I was a tiny thread in a big rope, of which we cannot know whence it came, nor whither it goes, and of which you cannot tell whether it might not be better for it not to be spun on and on without end, aim or sense..."

János' thoughts again became confused. The fever had returned.

Once more he was not in the wood, but at home in his own room, in his own bed, under a red silk eider-down, and on the wall immediately by his side, a big, black top hat began to spin. The streak of light on the top hat danced in a terrifying manner and the whole vision swayed up and down.

When the top hat began to dance, János still had enough sense left to tell himself that he must now be running a temperature of about 102 degrees or perhaps more, for this black phantom, which, though a lifeless object, he feared more than any fairy-tale monster, only appeared on these occasions.

Soon, however, he lost even this amount of consciousness. He was now merely afraid that the spinning black top hat might, in its giddy whirl, swoop down on his body and begin spinning him too.

It was bright daylight by the time János came to a second time.

A few paces off, the wood crackled. There were people walking there. To János it was all the same whether they were Russians or Hungarians.

Then voices too could be heard. János thought he recognized the voices.

"Well, brother, shall we reach the other bank?"

"Of course we shall. Can you drag yourself on?"

"Yes. I hope you can."

"I'll manage somehow. We'd better leave the rifles here."

"Don't do that. They were very insistent that no one who could move should dare go back without his arms."

So it was two of the wounded, the products of the Odryt, going back to life.

János clenched his teeth to keep from screaming. For if he did, they would take him with them, and he now knew for certain that he did not want to go away from here.

When the sound of their steps could no longer be heard, János began searching around his waist. He was suddenly frightened at the thought that he might have lost his pistol.

But no, there was the case, only he had to lift his body a little to take the pistol out. It was a difficult movement, but János nevertheless made it and even turned over completely on his right side, like he used to sleep at home when he did not want to have hectic dreams.

He put one hand under his head, the way he had liked to lie as a child, and the other hand with which he used to pull the pillow over his ear, he now put over his temple, with the same movement as then.

Only now there was a pistol in it. He had the habit of pulling the pillow over his ear, so that he should be isolated from the world while he slept. Now his hand was guided by the same aim. He did not wish to hear. About anything, ever again.

The two wounded men were out by the shore of the San, when they heard the shot.

“Listen! They were shooting!” said one of them, taking fright.

“We’ll have the Russkies on us!” said the other, and put the Manlicher to his shoulder.

And he fired into the thicket in the direction from which he had heard the shot.

The bullet broke off a small twig and scattered dry leaves over János.

But János no longer heard this.

1917

## DEZSŐ KOSZTOLÁNYI

(1885-1936)

Kosztolányi's life did not abound in external events. Like most of his contemporary fellow writers, he began his career as a journalist, and worked in editorial offices till the end of his life. He published a good many volumes of poetry, translations from English, French, Italian, German, Japanese, and Chinese poets, wrote several novels - *Pacsirta* (The Lark), *Nero, a véres költő* (The Bloody Poet. A novel about Nero), *Aranyásárkány* (The Golden Dragon), *Édes Anna* (Wonder Maid) - and about a hundred polished and colourful short stories. A posthumous edition of his minor prose writings - essays, newspaper articles - has run already into eleven volumes.

"This Ariel of Magyar literature," as one critic referred to him, had a tremendous capacity for work - he tried to capture the fleeting moment and reveal the most secret sentiments of the soul. He was spurred on by the passion of self-expression. "To my mind," he wrote, "nothing is as interesting as the Hungarian countryside, and nothing as exciting as the Hungarian middle class, to which I belong and about which I write." He was a writer of the Hungarian middle class, indeed of that middle class which widened its intellectual horizon to a European perspective, and which tried to stand its ground in the whirlwind of the century. Kosztolányi's poetry speaks of the grief and beauty of childhood, of the desire to play felt by a poet incapable - and unwilling - to grow up, of the anguish that torments the Modern Man. Towards the end of his life, during the years of his terrible disease (he died of cancer of the throat), his verses approached the peaks of Magyar lyric poetry. In those years Kosztolányi - whom many people had believed to be flippant and superficial and sometimes not without justification - wrote beautiful poems of grief, magnanimity, Death, poems filled with a sense of responsibility.

In his novels and short stories he uses the psychological approach to portray the various figures of society, and describes conflicts which either lead to tragedy or are resolved in a grotesque grimace on the author's part. Latin lucidity, restraint, and a seemingly impassive elegance, the use of choice words, the precision of his expression are all characteristic features of his writing. But it is precisely this cool, calm and refined tone that is so stirringly effective in account which lets the shocking facts speak without comment.

Hungary's whole literary life mourned his death, as did friends and admirers abroad. Thomas Mann, who had written the preface to the German edition of one of Kosztolányi's books, wrote the following words of farewell: "May he rest in peace! And may he and his name be wreathed in glory! In him, a Magyar poet with pure and lofty intentions has departed. Let him be remembered by his native country. His memory will never fade from our hearts."

## A HOLIDAY SWIM

The sun shone white.

As if illuminated by flashlight for a night-time photo, the small holiday resort at Lake Balaton glowed and sparkled in the sun. Everything, from the whitewashed huts to the maize sheds, looked perfectly white within the framework of the sandy beach. Even the sky was white and the acacias' dusty leaves were as white as writing paper.

It was about half past two.

Suhajda had had an early lunch. He came down the porch steps leading to the little peasant garden in the courtyard of the summer cottage.

"Where are you off to?" asked Mrs. Suhajda, crocheting amidst the small bright flowers.

"Bathing," yawned Suhajda, holding a pair of cherry-coloured swimming-trunks in his hand.

"Come on, take him with you" pleaded the woman.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because he's naughty," answered Suhajda. "Because he's a good-for-nothing brat." And after a pause he added: "Because he won't study."

"He does study," protested his wife, shrugging her shoulders, "he has been studying the whole morning."

In front of the kitchen a boy of about eleven sat on a bench pricking his ears. In his lap lay a closed book, his Latin grammar.

He was a skinny child, with a shaved head. He wore a red gym shirt and linen trousers, and had leather sandals on his bare feet. He blinked towards his father and mother.

"Well," said Suhajda harshly and with a severe toss of his head, "how do you say: 'They shall praise me?'"

"*Lauderentur*," mumbled the child in confusion without thinking, but standing up before answering as if he were in school.

"*Lauderentur*," nodded Suhajda ironically, "*lauderentur* indeed. You will fail in your second examination too."

"No, no, he knows it," interjected the mother trying to find excuses for the boy, "but he gets all tangled up. You frighten him."

"I shall take him out of school, honest to God I will," the father said, working himself into a rage. "I'll make a locksmith out of him, or a cartwright."

He had no idea why in his anger he had chosen these particular trades, which he knew nothing about.

"Come here, Johnny," said the mother, "you will study, won't you, Johnny darling?"

"He'll be the end of me, this snivelling brat," interrupted Suhajda, for anger was the spice of life to him. "The end of me," he repeated sensing how his wrath was widening his arteries and chasing away the afternoon's boredom.

"I'll study," stammered the boy in a whisper. And in his humiliated nonentity he glanced for support towards his mother. He could hardly bear to look at his father. He did not see him. He only felt him. Everywhere, always, hatefully.

"Don't study," said Suhajda with a deprecatory gesture. "Don't bother about studying. It's quite unnecessary!"

"But he does study," repeated the mother, cuddling the boy's head. "And surely you will forgive him. Johnny," she added in the same breath, unexpectedly, "bring your bathing-trunks down at once. Your father will take you for a swim."

Johnny did not quite understand what was happening. He did not even realize that his mother's intervention had in some miraculous way settled the long drawn-out squabble between his father and himself. Anyway, he rushed up to the porch and into his little dark room. He searched wildly for his cherry coloured bathing-suit. It was exactly like his father's, only smaller. Mrs. Suhajda had made them both.

The father seemed to hesitate. Without answering his wife's request directly, he stopped at a gooseberry bush, as if waiting for his son to catch up with him. Then he appeared to change his mind and went out by the little garden-gate. He walked towards the lake somewhat more slowly than usual.

It took quite a few minutes for the boy to find his bathing trunks.

Johnny had failed in Latin at his exams in the second grade of secondary school. He was preparing to try again in the autumn, but was rather lax about it. As a punishment his father had forbidden him to bathe for a whole week. He would have had two more days without bathing, so now he felt he had to make the most of this golden opportunity. He turned everything inside out. When he at last discovered his bathing-suit, he did not even bother to wrap it up, but just flourished it in his hand as he rushed down to the courtyard. There his mother was waiting for him. He stretched up to kiss the sweet face he so worshipped, and then hurried after his father.

His mother called after him that she would be coming down to the shore later on.

Suhajda was about twenty steps ahead of his son on the footpath. Johnny's leather sandals sailed through the dust as he ran after him. He caught up with his father by the campion hedge. But he did not rush right up to him, just sidled up shyly like a dog which is not quite sure of its welcome.

The father did not say a word. His face, which the child watched with quick sidelong glances, was unapproachable and non-committal. He threw back his head, and stared into space. He paid no attention to the boy at his side, as if he were unaware of his existence.

Johnny, who had felt quite happy a few minutes ago, again became downcast and flustered. He felt thirsty, would have liked to drink, run behind a tree, or even turn back. But he was afraid that his father might shout at him again, and so he had to bear the situation he had created lest it should turn from bad to worse. He kept wondering what would happen to him next.

It took hardly more than four minutes to walk from the house to the beach. As resorts go, the place was pretty shabby. No electricity, no comfort. The beach was pebbly, the whole place sadly second-class. Poorly-paid clerks passed their summer vacation here with their families.

Under the mulberry-trees in the sweltering courtyards, men and women sat around barefooted and scantily clad, munching water-melons and corn on the cob.

Suhajda greeted his acquaintances in his normal friendly voice. During these blissful minutes of armistice the boy confidently concluded that his father was not as angry as he pretended to be.

Before long, however, his father's forehead clouded over once more.

Crickets were chirping in the sunshine. A sweetly stale whiff from the lake reached their nostrils, as the decayed bath-house came into view. But Suhajda still kept silent.

The woman in charge, Mrs. Istenes - a dotted red scarf wound round her hair - opened their respective cabins. One for the father; the second, in which Mrs. Suhajda generally undressed, for the boy. There was no one else at the beach, aside from a young fellow who was occupied with repairing an old skiff. At the moment he was trying to straighten some crooked rusty nails with a hammer.

Johnny got undressed first.

He came out of his cabin, but did not quite know what to do. He did not dare to go into the water by himself, though he had yearned for it so long. Waiting for his father in confused embarrassment, he studied his feet with painful interest as if he saw them for the first time.

At last Suhajda stepped out of the cabin in his cherry-coloured bathing-trunks. Although tending to corpulence, he was a strongly-built man, and his chest was covered with black hair that aroused the child's constant admiration.

Johnny looked up at him, trying to read in his eyes. But he could not see into them, the gold-framed spectacles shone too brightly.

Blushing with embarrassment he watched his father walk into the lake.

He did not follow him until Suhajda flung at him over his shoulders:

"Come on."

Even then he did not plunge into the water or swim about like a frog as he generally did. He just stumbled timidly after his father, waiting for a word of encouragement. Suhajda noticed the boy's behaviour.

"Afraid?" he asked sullenly over his shoulder.

"No."

"Why do you act like an idiot then?"

They stood beside the pole where the water reached up to the chest of the child and a little below the father's waist. They both crouched in the water up to their necks, luxuriating in its mild caress, its apple-green and milky-white shimmer.

A sense of well-being inspired Suhajda to playful teasing.

"You are a coward, my friend."

"No."

Suhajda grabbed his son with both arms, lifted him high and threw him into the water.

Johnny flew through the air and fell back with an enormous splash, landing on his bottom. The lake opened under him, and then closed in over his head tempestuously with a mysterious droning. It took him a few seconds to struggle back to the surface. Water bubbled from his mouth and nose. He rubbed his blinded eyes with both his fists.



“Nasty, what?” asked the father.

“No.”

“Then once more. One, two,” and he took the boy in both his arms.

At the word “three,” he flung the boy with a big swing in the same direction, but a little farther than before, beyond the next pole to which several ropes were tied. He, therefore, did not observe how his son after turning a somersault, fell into the water with head thrown back and arms stretched out. Suhajda turned away without misgiving.

In front of him lay the sunlit shore, and the water in between sparkled as if millions of butterflies were fluttering over its surface on diamond wings.

He waited a few seconds like the first time, and then asked in annoyance:

“What’s up?”

Then, as the silence continued, he raised his voice threateningly, hoarsely:

“Come on! Don’t play-act like that.”

Still no answer.

“Where are you?” he cried a little louder, looking all about him and peering near-sightedly even into the distance, for Johnny could swim under water and so might pop up almost anywhere.

Yet all the while Suhajda had the uncomfortable feeling that much more time had gone by than on the previous occasion.

He became thoroughly alarmed.

He sprang up and, pushing his way through the water as fast as he could, tried to reach the spot where his son had presumably disappeared, all the time shouting:

“Johnny, Johnny!”

He did not find him behind the pole. Now he began to dig around with both his arms, as if shoveling gravel. He churned up the water at random. He tried to peer down to the bottom but the muddy lake remained inscrutable, even when he put his hitherto dry head below the surface till his eyes protruded behind their lenses like fish eyes. Then he started to search under the water more systematically, lying flat on his belly in the mud, kneeling, crouching, leaning first on one elbow, then on the other, going round and round in circles, or moving sideways - but all in vain.

The boy was nowhere to be found. And all around him water, the terrifying uniformity of water.

He came up for a long breath, panting and sputtering.

While under water, he vaguely hoped that by the time he came up his son would be there too, laughing, standing beside the pole or even further out, perhaps he had already run to his cabin to dress. But when Suhajda came up, he realized that, although time had seemed endless down there, he had only been under water for a few seconds and that his son could not have left the lake meanwhile.

Above the surface there reigned a calm indifference such as he would have found it impossible to imagine previously.

“Hallo, hallo!” he shouted towards the shore in a voice he himself could not recognize, “I can’t find him anywhere!”

The lad who was tinkering with the boat, cupped his hand to his ear.

“What is it?”

“He is nowhere!” cried the father in despair.

“Who?”

“I can’t find him,” he yelled till his voice broke. “Help!”

The lad put his hammer on the seat of the skiff, kicked off his trousers - so as not to soak them - and waded into the lake. He hurried as fast as he could, but to the desperate man in the water it looked as if the other was just dawdling. Meanwhile Suhajda plunged again and again and, crawling along on his knees, searched in another direction. Then, shocked to see how far he had advanced, he each time returned to his point of departure, where he - as it were - stood on guard. He clung to the pole with both hands, so as not to succumb to the dizziness which befell him.

By the time the young man reached him, Suhajda was panting dizzily. He could not give any articulate answer to the lad’s questions.

Both of them were floundering about aimlessly.

On the shore, Mrs. Istenes was wringing her hands. Her screaming drew a crowd of twenty or thirty people to the shore. They brought boat-hooks and nets with them. Even a small boat set out for the scene of the accident - which was really quite superfluous as the water there was quite shallow.

The news spread quickly all over the village that somebody had drowned. Already as an established fact.

At that very moment amidst the flowers of the peasant garden Mrs. Suhajda was putting down her crocheting. She went up to the little dark room, where Johnny a little while ago had looked for his bathing-suit. She locked the room and started to walk towards the lake as she had promised him.

She walked slowly under her parasol, which protected her against the glaring rays of the sun, wondering whether to bathe or not, but finally deciding against it. As she reached the campion hedge, the thread of her thoughts broke off confusedly, and she shut her parasol and began to run. She kept on running all the way to the beach.

There she saw two gendarmes and a muttering crowd, mostly peasant women. Many of them were crying.

The mother understood at once what had happened. Wailing uncontrollably, she stumbled towards the beach, where a small group formed a close circle round her son who lay sprawling on the sand. They did not let her approach. They seated her on a chair. She was close to fainting as she asked, over and over again, whether he was still alive.

No, he was not. They had found him, after searching for fifteen minutes, right behind the pole where the father had knelt and plunged all the time. His heart had stopped beating. His pupils did not react to light any longer. The doctor had held him upside down, shaken the water out of him, propped up his chest, tried artificial breathing, applied gymnastics to the tiny dead arms for a long time, listened to the heart with his stethoscope - all in vain. Finally he had thrown his instruments into his bag and left.

This death, which had happened so suddenly, with such apparent capriciousness, was by now as everlastingly real, as firm and immovable as the mightiest of mountains.

The mother was carried home in a peasant cart. Suhajda was still sitting on the shore in his cherry-coloured bathing-trunks. His face and his spectacles were dripping with water and tears. He kept on sighing beside himself:

“Oh God, oh God, oh God.”

He was helped to his feet and led to his cabin to get dressed at last.

It wasn't three o'clock yet.

1924

## GÉZA CSÁTH

(1887-1918)

Géza Csáth was a *cousin* of Dezső Kosztolányi, and came of a provincial middle-class family like the latter. Already in their childhood years both of them were passionately fond of music and literature, the secrets of life, its passing moods and thrilling mysteries. Géza Csáth graduated in medicine, specializing in psychiatry, and soon became assistant professor in a Budapest clinic. His first volume of short stories, entitled *A varázsló kertje* (The Sorcerer's Garden), met with great success. He faced a brilliant career - by common consent, he was regarded as having the makings of a physician, psychiatrist, scientist, musician, painter, and critic alike. He wrote contributions to scientific periodicals; published a book on Puccini; and his volumes of short stories - *A varázsló kertje*, *Délutáni álom* (An Afternoon's Dream), *Schmidt mézeskalácsos* (Gingerbread-maker Schmidt), *Muzsikusok* (Musicians), and *Az albíró* (The Deputy Judge) - drew the attention of the most discerning section of the public to the young author.

Csáth was destined never to reach the fullness of life and work. About 1910, he became a drug addict. He wrote but little and neglected his medical practice. The events of the First World War caused him little concern - he was only worried about the difficulty of securing supplies of his drug. In a fit of jealousy he killed his wife with two revolver shots and wounded their daughter. He was taken to hospital, but escaped and then committed suicide by taking poison.

Ruthlessly, with an almost sadistic fury, Csáth laid bare in his short stories the most hidden and most terrible of human traits, the delirious reel of the senses, human emotions which until then even modern medicine and psychology had approached with cautious diffidence. "He was a writer on matter and the senses," a critic wrote of him. Indeed, no one had a more intimate knowledge of the senses in their rabid unbalance. And as regards matter, he used the new, emerging, scientific outlook of the time to investigate the relationship between body and soul and made researches into morbid distortions of the mind.

## THE RED-HAIRED GIRL

“The stories in this lovely picture-book were written by daddy Andersen, and only well-behaved children are allowed to read them. That’s what makes this book different from all others which Santa Claus brings even for naughty little boys when they haven’t been particularly bad. But Andersen’s book is only for good children, and when they behave badly, it is taken away from them until they have mended their ways. So bear that in mind!”

I was six years old, when my father told me this one Christmas Eve. He spoke seriously, but without frowning, and looked straight into my eyes, while I stroked his cheek. The barber had been there that afternoon; and I thought how queer it was to have so young a father.

My parents were playing cards with my grandparents who had come for a visit. My sister Terka’s small fist was filled with bright gold coins. My younger brother, Gudi, was tucking away six oranges and building three houses with his new building blocks. And I lay stretched out full-length on the drawing room settee reading the Andersen book until it was time to go to bed, when I put it under my pillow.

This was how my friendship with Andersen began. After that the book lay beneath my pillow every night, for I never went to bed without it. My father did not confiscate it more than two or three times, but he always returned it when I went to bed, as I could not go to sleep without it. I can still remember the occasions when the book was taken from me. The first time was, when I climbed to the top of the chicken coop and broke the roof in, the second when I refused to eat my tomato soup, and the third, when I cut all the roses in our garden and scattered them on the bed of red-haired Eszti<sup>26</sup>, my younger brother’s nurse. This time it was grandpa who insisted on my being chastised, as it was always he who cut the roses.

I had known well in advance that I would have to pay for this, but Eszti was such a lovely girl! She did not wear stiff skirts that smelt of starch as did the cook or the chambermaid, and her clothes were deliciously soft. Her laughter, too, had such a charming ring in it. She also was fond of Andersen’s stories, and enjoyed my reading them out to her. Her favourite tale was that of the Snow Queen, and we often read it. The one about the Red Slippers was not to her taste. I could detect no other reason for her dislike than her belief that she resembled its heroine, the beautiful Catherine, who suffered so terribly for her vanity. I, therefore, ceased to annoy her with the tale of the Red Slippers and read it only when I was alone. But every time I did so, I had the feeling that the vain and lovely Catherine was actually Eszti. And when I reached the point in the story, where the executioner cuts off beautiful Catherine’s feet and the red slippers go on dancing, I closed my eyes and fancied that I saw the feet, Eszti’s blood-stained feet, dancing towards the forest. That is why I read the story over and over again.

One night, I dreamed of the Dauntless Tin Soldier, probably because the book, as usual, was lying beneath my pillow. The little dancer in my dream was Eszti, and I was the tin soldier. At the end of the tale both the little dancer and the tin soldier are burned to death in the stove. The day after, the maid, in cleaning out the stove, finds a small tin heart in place of the soldier, while all that is left of the little dancer is the charred tin star which adorned her head. At this point, I began to cry in my sleep. It was Eszti who woke me. “Have you had a bad dream, Józsika?” she asked, sitting down on the edge of my bed. I silently stroked her arm. We were alone in the room. Terka and Gudi were still asleep in their little beds. Outside it was

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<sup>26</sup> Eszti, pronounced Esty: diminutive of the Hungarian for Esther.

snowing. A fire was already burning brightly in the stove, for it was one of Eszti's duties to make the fire every morning when it was still dark. I got a whiff of the pleasant scent of Eszti's hair and noticed that she had already washed in fresh cold water. Suddenly I sat up in bed and, laying my arms about her neck, kissed her lips. Eszti warmly returned my kiss and pressed me passionately to herself. I was so happy, I could have cried for sheer joy.

Andersen and I remained friends to the last, but Eszti left us six months later.

I was much grieved at having lost her, but eventually got over it. Only I never dared read any more the tale about beautiful Catherine. I was afraid of awakening painful memories.

Time passed, and I grew into adolescence, wore long trousers, and had to learn algebra. After my algebra lessons, I would again turn to Andersen, feeling that all the truth and beauty which Man could ever experience in this world were there in that much-thumbed little volume. And when I sauntered through our garden in the twilight of an Indian summer evening, I often expected that, at some bend of the garden-path, I would suddenly find myself face to face with Andersen, whom my fancy pictured as a stooping old man, with kindly blue eyes, wearing a powdered wig, and leaning on a gold-topped ebony cane. The cool evening made me visualize him with a big chequered comforter hanging from his shoulders, and I was sure his clean-cut, wrinkled old face would break into a smile, and he would begin to chat with me, remarking:

"Good evening, my young friend; the days are growing cold, and an old man like myself has to be careful. How are you getting on? So you like my stories, I am delighted to hear it."

But Andersen never came, and so I gave up the hope of ever meeting him. I even began to lose my belief in the immortality of the soul. I grew negligent about going to confession, and deliberately had breakfast before communion. To use my mother's words, I became more and more estranged from God and addicted to sin.

At this time - but not for long - I neglected the Andersen book. I took an interest in the works of the naturalist writers, and thought that Andersen, as an artist, could not hold a candle to these perfect and close observers of life. I did not then know that wisdom was to be found neither in sincerity nor insincerity, but elsewhere, beyond the two.

Of course, I did not realize this until much later, after I had come to live in Budapest, where I attended the university as a medical student and took courses in anatomy, histology and other branches of medical science. It was then that I also found my way back to Andersen. One might believe that important events had occurred in my life the while, yet nothing had happened, save that there had been a gradual change in my world outlook. Perhaps that was a disadvantage. My father advised me, in one of his letters, to become acquainted with life in the capital, adding that a little innocent amusement in the company of friends now and then would do me no harm. But I did not take his advice; I had no friends and took no pleasure in merrymaking.

I was eighteen years old and spent all my Sunday afternoons with my relatives, who said I was a sober, nice young fellow who had not ruined his ruddy provincial complexion through the city's night-life, and that I was evidently keeping early hours and not frequenting the coffee-houses. Only my uncle Gyula, an army colonel, hinted - soldier-fashion - that one could no longer live without women once one was eighteen. I think it was chiefly the wish to annoy his jealous wife, Aunt Margaret, that prompted him to this remark. She, in turn, tried to persuade me to "stick to the straight and narrow," until I married.

Aunt Margaret's arguments did not impress me. I refused to admit the soundness of her view that the same rules applied to men and women alike. But it was autumn, and my studies kept

me busy enough. Anatomy especially caused me worry and fatigue at the beginning. After the hated years at secondary school, I at last learned to like studying. In winter I would work far into the evening in well-heated dissecting rooms of the Anatomical Institute. Then, having washed my hands with soap and warm water, I would saunter home through the well-lit streets, imbued with the refreshing feeling of having been reborn. After supper I was glad to be able to devote some time to my favourite books.

Andersen's tales had, of course, accompanied me to the capital, too. The binding had grown very shabby, the corners were frayed, and the coloured picture on the cover had turned grey. I very seldom reached for it now.

Walking home from the laboratory, one evening in January, I stopped in front of a millinery shop. In glancing at the hats in the window, I became aware of a woman a couple of steps from me, also gazing at the window display. She was a pretty girl, slender and of medium height, wearing a hat trimmed with feathers and a dress which was almost fashionable. Her complexion gleamed white in the light of the electric lamps.

Suddenly she started, her red hair flamed, and she looked at me intently. It was red-haired Eszti! She too recognized me at once. We shook hands and laughed with delight at our unexpected meeting. Soon we were as deep in conversation as if we had parted only the day before. I accompanied her home. It did not take me long to learn that she had come to town as a maid a year and a half before, and had since gone wrong. Yet she was not dressed like an ordinary street-walker. I praised her clothes, and she replied that she hated anything in bad taste and only wore what suited her. Meanwhile we had walked through a number of back streets and reached her flat. So far Eszti's beauty had made no impression on me, probably because my afternoon' work, to which I had lent all my attention, had exhausted me. I was about to take leave of her, but she forestalled me by asking if I wouldn't like to come up. So we went up to her room. She made tea, and for a time we talked quietly of my home, of my father and mother, my brother and sister, and of the past.

Eszti recalled with pleasure the years she had spent with us as nurse and chamber-maid, and had not even forgotten that I had once strewn her bed with roses. Then she excused herself for a moment and disappeared behind the screen next to the stove. I could now let my glance wander round her large, conventionally furnished room with its scarlet curtains, high-backed settee, polished bed and table. The wall, as far as could be discerned in the dim lamplight, was covered with dark paper and decorated by two large gold-framed pictures of cross county hunting-parties. My leisurely contemplation of the room was suddenly interrupted by Eszti. She stepped from behind the screen, clad in a heliotrope silk dressing-gown which left her throat and arms bare. My heart began beating wildly, and I felt myself growing pale. She came up to me, without uttering a word, and clasping my head with both hands, bent forward and kissed my lips. The blood rushed to my cheeks and I buried my face in her fragrant hair. Once more the exultation which filled my entire being with overflowing happiness, made me want to cry.

Eszti became my mistress. But the blissful moments, during which I learned the great secret of life, were followed, especially in the first days, by hours of bitterness. Was it not undignified, I asked myself, for me to accept the love of such a woman? What would my father, a man of very strict principles, think of it? On the other hand, I did not dare to offer Eszti money. Indeed, the girl's behaviour revealed such charm, attachment and honesty that I simply could not conceive of her leading a life of easy virtue, or how she had avoided becoming vulgar.

I never broached these subjects to her, which were too painful even to let my own thoughts dwell upon. At first I contemplated writing my father, and asking him to raise my monthly allowance, at the same time making a clean breast of it by telling him openly that I was keeping Eszti.

I even started writing the letter, but never finished it, and tearing it up, resolved to let things take their course.

Usually Eszti would be waiting for me by the gate of the Anatomical Institute at six o'clock each evening, and we would then go for a walk. We would have supper together at some small restaurant, or at her flat, and I would remain with her until 9 o'clock. I was surprised to see how much culture the girl had acquired, although she didn't care for reading, and had little taste for the arts. She could converse pleasantly and with fluency. She often recalled the years she had spent with us, and had a charmingly frank way of relating the memories out of the past which came to her mind. She had a sensitive emotional life which she willingly revealed to me, and always showed much interest when I spoke of my affairs.

I realized that it was not curiosity, or lust for money, or, as is mostly the case, a peculiarly passionate nature which had brought her to Budapest and had been the cause of her fall, but a refinement and sensitivity too great for a girl of her social standing. She must have felt that she had been born for better things than to become the wife of a peasant or servant, and she had certainly succeeded, as far as circumstances would permit, in rising above her original station in the world.

I loved her because I realized that the perfect beauty of her body was far surpassed by that of her soul. Our relationship was harmonious and undisturbed to a degree I had never dared hope for. And Eszti fostered my passion with infinite tact.

It happened during the second month of our renewed friendship that I was suddenly taken ill. True to the promise I had given my mother, I sent her a postcard notifying her that I had taken to my bed. I had contracted influenza. In the evening, fever developed. At such times it is as though the air has become as dense as oil, and everything seems to be swimming in a soft warm fluid. The wardrobes quite naturally begin to lean to one side or rise to the ceiling. You take fright, for a moment, as the stove, black and awe-inspiring, bends over you; the next moment, it retreats into the corner as harmless as a small grey kitten. Green balls, in groups or singly, keep swimming between you and the objects in the room, bumping into each other with a slow motion, and then separating again. All this serves to tickle your fancy and, at the same time, makes you feel giddy.

The lamp was burning on the table when I awoke, and I saw small, slender green circles playing hide-and-seek in the corners of the room. The landlady was in the act of replenishing the fire. Suddenly I remembered Eszti, who would surely be waiting for me this evening, as usual. Although it cost me a great effort, I asked for my writing-pad and wrote her that she should forgive me for having let her wait for me in vain, but I had been taken ill and send her my love and many kisses until we should meet. Then I again dozed off.

I awoke early, and the drab, blank wall, beyond my window fixed me with its cold stare. I began to think of what the mornings at home had been like, when I had been ill. I saw my father hurrying to my bedside as soon as he was awake. He feels my pulse, examines my eyes and throat and then leaves to wash his hands. The maids cross the room on tiptoe. My room looks out on the street, and I watch the shops opening, one after another: István Miskolczy's book and stationery shop, Joseph Löwy's assortment of tombstones, Jakab Schmunzer's salt-and-flour store, and Menyhért Kocsis, the barber and hairdresser. Dawn is succeeded by



daylight. The pain has abated, and I relax at the thought that I need not attend school and would not even be allowed to if I wanted to. The table is being set in the next room, I can hear the clinking of china and silver. The chamber-maid is toasting thin slices of bread over the stove for breakfast, and mother asks me how I slept and promises to read to me before lunch.

My kind-hearted landlady interrupted the train of my reminiscences by bringing in coffee and engaging me in conversation, but all that was nothing compared with the happiness of being sick at home...

I felt better in the forenoon, and read the paper and dozed by turns. Having no appetite, I did not eat any lunch, yet my temperature went up again in the afternoon. I was gazing with tired, feverish eyes at the grey winter sky above the blank wall, when there was a knock at my door and Eszti slipped into the room. She sat down on the edge of my bed, kissed my face and forehead, smoothed my pillows and the wrinkled sheet, and then proceeded to take off her coat. It was wonderful how kind and simple she was... She had combed her hair smooth as in her servant days. She asked how I had been taken ill and how I was feeling. The girl's extraordinary femininity had an exhilarating effect upon me. She said I should not talk so much and, drawing the cover up to my neck, told me to try and sweat. I willingly obeyed, but stipulated that she should read to me. Andersen's ragged and faded volume of fairy-tales was lying on the bookshelf among my notes and voluminous medical books. She found the tale of the little Snow Queen and read it to me. By the time she had finished, it had grown dark. Eszti put on the tea-kettle, and then we had the lamp brought in. The next story was the one about old Mother Elder, a tale for children in bed with a bad cold. Eszti read it slowly, pausing now and then to prepare the tea, squeeze some lemon-juice into it and bring it to me on a tray, after which she sat down again and continued reading.

Suddenly there was a ring at the door outside. Soon after, we heard the front door being opened; and the next instant my mother entered.

Embarrassed, and probably stammering a bit, I greeted her with a "Good evening, Mother!" She smothered me with kisses, stroked my head and hands, and looked into my eyes. I could see her relief on finding me not seriously ill.

"Thank heaven, you have almost no temperature," she said. Eszti meanwhile had risen from her chair, and curtsied when my mother's look caught hers.

"Good evening, Madam."

A familiar look of severity spread over my mother's features. I was overwhelmed with fear and felt a cold shiver running down my spine.

"Eszti and I are reading Andersen's tales, mother," I brought forth abruptly. "She is just reading me the story about old Mother Elder while I'm drinking the tea she made for me."

My mother smiled faintly and asked:

"What else have you been reading in Andersen's book?"

"The tale of the Snow Queen," Eszti answered.

"That was my favourite story when I was a child," I said. "Do you remember, mother, how often Eszti used to read it out to me in those days?"

"It's a lovely story," replied my mother, in a quiet, soft voice, as she took off her coat and hat, "but I believe you liked the story about beautiful Catherine and that of the dauntless tin soldier equally well in those days."

“Yes,” I murmured drowsily, “and the story of Catherine appealed to me specially, because I always imagined that Catherine was really Eszti.”

“Eszti was never as stuck-up or hard-hearted as Catherine,” answered my mother, bestowing a warm glance upon Eszti.

“That wasn’t why I thought of Eszti,” I said. “It was because lying in bed one morning I dreamt that I was the dauntless tin soldier and the maid was scraping my earthly remains out of the stove in the form of a small bit of tin, while she found nothing of my sweetheart, the little paper dancer, but the tiny tin star, among the ashes... I cried in my sleep, and it was Eszti who woke me, and I threw my arms around her.” Here I lost the thread of what I was trying to say. I could yet hear my mother and Eszti pottering about the room; but the little green fever circles had again begun dancing before my eyes. Abandoning myself to the soft waves of heat that enveloped me, I stared fixedly at the door, which suddenly approached me, only to retreat again into the distance, along with the walls. When the door had receded so far that it almost seemed to have shrunk into nothingness, it opened slowly and noiselessly.

An old man entered with bent back, and powdered wig, leaning on a gold-tipped ebony cane, and came towards me.

I soon recognized him. It was dear old Andersen. He looked at me with his deep-set blue eyes and stopped beside my bed.

“You recognize me, don’t you, my young friend,” he said. “You know how fond of you I am. As fond as I am of the tin soldier, the little dancer, old Mother Elder and beautiful Catherine. I am also very fond of Eszti, and am glad indeed that she too is so fond of you. It is pleasant and charming to see a young boy and girl who understand each other... You have often come across such a thing in my tales, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Do you still remember the tale of a mother?” he asked.

“Yes, I remember, it is about the mother who goes to the land of death to save her child.”

“In that story the mother sacrifices all she possesses in order to find the land of death.”

“Yes, she gives her eyes, her hair, her arms, and all her tears,” I continued mechanically and sadly.

“But it is not only in fiction that such things occur. Your mother would do the same, my boy,” Andersen said in a tremulous, persuasive voice. “Youth and desire are like two big flowers growing on one stem. And it is a sight that gladdens the beholder...”

Here he paused and gently tickled my cheeks with his cane. “But the expert gardener fears the two flowers will destroy one another through their splendour, and seeks to protect them. Do you understand, my lad?”

The old man looked into my eyes, and I did not know whether to laugh at his words, as at some fable, or to shed tears. I returned his look, tranquilly, seriously. He bent his knee in so droll a manner that I was afraid he might lose his balance or vanish altogether, but he said instead:

“Remember the two flowers and bear in mind that if one of them withers, the other will wither too... And now, goodbye.”

He turned to go. The door and walls again receded into the distance, and Andersen too grew ever smaller as he withdrew. He reached the door at last, opened it and disappeared.

I felt a light, cool touch on my forehead. It was my mother's hand. She was seated on the edge of my bed. When I opened my eyes, she asked whether I felt hungry?

I begged her to read me the story of a mother. It did not occur to me until the following day that Eszti had no longer been in the room.

I was allowed to get up three days later and to accompany my mother to the station, wrapped up in my warmest clothing.

On the way back, my steps of their own accord led me towards Eszti's flat. There I was told that she had gone away the day before, no one knew where.

It was very hard, at first, to return home alone each evening, and many an hour I lingered in the street, hoping to see Eszti coming towards me. But she never did, and I never heard of her again.

1908

## FRIGYES KARINTHY

(1887-1938)

“Frigyes Karinthy is one of those playful artists,” a friend wrote. “His playfulness consists of smashing up his toys to see what is inside them.” He played like an adolescent boy: he was concerned with unknowable Life, the grotesque situations of everyday life, the absurdities of middle-class existence - a curious mixture of humour and tragedy.

Karinthy has created significant works in almost every genre - novels, short stories, poetry, plays, sketches, skits, newspaper articles championing pacifism, militant literary essays, literary caricatures. He called himself an ‘encyclopaedist’ who set himself the task of reassessment. “Everything is Different,” he claimed in the title of one of his books. “Everything is different from what we see it to be, so let’s see what *true* Reality is like! Don’t be content with just the appearance of things!” Between this search and pedestrian financial worries that never seemed to let go of him, his lifework was frittered away. He published more than a hundred volumes, but, as he put it, he had wasted his God-given talent - he never wrote the Summing Up of All, the Great Novel, the Philosophic Work That Heralds the Dawn of a Rejuvenated World, the New Encyclopaedia, the Poem That Goes Straight to the Heart... He expressed his strange tragedy in a short story, entitled *The Circus*. It is the tragic story of the artist who, foiled in his attempt to become a poet, ends up as a clown, and climbs up a wobbling, spine-chilling structure only to draw forth his violin and play the melody for which he had once joined the troupe of this mundane Circus. Karinthy was never granted the chance to play *his* melody. But he has left behind his preparations for it - a work of imposing proportions even in its fragmentary pattern; a series of experiments, of finger-exercises, which he had written for fun and for money until such time as he would start writing the Great Work; the chips, the fragments, which, after all, fall into picture, giving the fascinating portrait of a lonesome person of a rational turn of mind.

His principal works are: *Így írtok ti* (That’s How You Write), a series of witty literary caricatures of Hungarian authors and world classics; *Utazás a koponyám körül* (A Trip Around My Skull), a novelette in which he tells the story of his cerebral tumour with unmatched lucidity and rationalism; *Tanár úr kérem* (Teacher, Please), a humorous chronicle of life in a secondary school, describing both its joys and sorrows; two volumes of verse, an abundance of short stories, humorous sketches and skits.

## THE CIRCUS

No doubt, it was a passionate yearning that drew me to the circus, but perhaps I longed just as much to play the violin. I got the violin first, however, and I was not taken to the circus; so this may be why, from time to time, I kept now and then dreaming of the latter. Once I saw that circus far away, behind the hills, and I felt as if somebody were leading me there by the hand. Another time I was standing in the very middle of a great unknown city; yet there it was - the same circus, the same entrance, and the lobby with doors opening in opposite directions. This time I might even have had a ticket and gone in, but at this point, my dream became confused, and again I was left outside.

At last, I dreamed the dream out to the end. There I was standing at the entrance, behind the box-office, and a limping, bearded, excited man, the manager of the circus, stood next to me, drawing aside the gaudy-coloured curtain with one hand and gabbling loudly: "Come in, gentlemen, come in, this way, please, just step in, the show is about to begin, this way, this way, please!" People were streaming in, no end of people - a motley crowd, domestics, soldiers, well-dressed women, well shaved men - pushing one another, laughing and chatting at the top of their voices. I knew very well that the manager would spot me immediately. He noticed me indeed and, grabbing my arm, asked angrily: "Hullo, hullo, have you got a ticket? If not, out with you!" My heart died within me, I began to stammer that I had no ticket, that I did not want to enter as a spectator anyway, but here, look at my violin, I want to... and I desperately showed him my fiddle, which I was carrying under my arm. He bent down close to my face and waited angrily till I had finished stammering that I had no ticket but had composed a song, all by myself, on my fiddle, and if he would but let me in, I should play it to the audience. At this he laughed so loud that I could see right down his throat, like into a deep, deep tunnel, and then he said roughly: "Young fellow, you are off your beam, your head is surely full of steam." I found this a very witty piece of poetry and saw that the manager was flattered by my involuntary acknowledgement. He gave me a pat on the back and told me to wait a moment, something could be done about it perhaps, anyway we would talk it over.

Later on he actually came into the dark gangway where I was standing all a-tremble, and said with a patronizing air that fiddling was just gobbledygook. I understood immediately that he had not much confidence in my prowess. I protested vehemently, whereupon he became serious and told me, well, all right, we might as well have a try, but first he had to speak to the superior military authorities where I could get a stamp as an imperial and royal hoity-toity. Till this was arranged, he would like to show me the whole circus from behind the scenes - the actors, the animals, everything - so that I should have an idea what it was all about and what the audience wanted.

My heart beat with joy and happiness at the thought that I was in on the show at last; nevertheless, I was scared, too. Tightly pressing the violin under my arm, I endeavoured not to forget the melody. The manager led me past many, many curtains on which all kinds of pictures were painted. High above, men in red garments were working. I expected to see actors and lady riders now, but no! a broad, high staircase came next. The manager scampered up the stairs so quickly that I could hardly follow him. Then we passed through rooms hung with velvet drapery. By mistake I opened a door, through which poured a deafening din, and I saw a swarm of human heads inside. The manager shouted at me to close the door immediately. That was the audience, he said, waiting for the performance, and it ought not to see what was going on here.

Then he opened a small iron door. An enormous, semicircular hall spread out deep below us. In the middle of this magnificent hall with its fountains and palms, a good-looking man with taut lips and wild eyes was in the act of strangling a woman. Her throat merely gave forth heavy, rattling sounds. It was horrible to behold. I began to scream and curse, and demanded that the woman be freed from the man's grip. But the manager held me back.

"You fool," he said, "don't you see, these are my actors, it's only a play; besides, they are not human beings at all, they are only wax-dolls, like in a wax-cabinet." I looked more closely and saw that the woman's face was quite unnatural and that her eyes were of glass.

I was ashamed and began to speak of something else, but my heart was still throbbing wildly. Now the manager led me into a big, untidy room, where gaudily dressed boys and girls with made-up faces were sitting on benches like in a school-room. This was the school for clowns. I too had to sit down on a bench, and the manager called one pupil after the other to the teacher's desk. One of them came up walking on his hands and intermittently striking the floor with his head. He had to repeat this act. Then the manager called a tall man who drew out a knife and ripped open his own breast. Lungs and blood and guts streamed from the wound, and the man collapsed with a loud groan. The manager nodded approval.

"That's good," he said, "they'll like that."

The suicide went back to his place, took needle and yarn from his bench and sewed up his breast, hissing and grimacing all the while. Now I saw that his chest was stitched together in ever so many places.

He was followed by others, who distinguished themselves in a variety of ways. There were ventriloquists who imitated human and animal voices with such admirable accuracy that I could hardly believe my ears. One of them impersonated a child so perfectly that tears rushed into my eyes when his voice became that of a dying child; but looking into his face I saw with amazement that his eyes and mouth remained motionless. Another one created the illusion of a crying and scolding woman. He was succeeded by other imitators of women's voices; lewd, hoarse laughter struck my ears, and I saw threatening eyes glowering in the darkness.

Then the manager glanced into a book and called me by my name. I rose from my bench, his eyes measured me from head to foot, and he shot this question at me:

"Well, what can you do?"

I pointed to my fiddle and again stammered something about the melody I had composed. A burst of laughter rang through the room, and the manager furiously banged his desk.

"Do you still want to annoy me with that damned fiddle of yours?" he asked. "What rubbish!"

I wanted to tell him that the melody I had composed was quite exceptional, and that I should like his permission to play it. However, he hailed one of the boys and ordered him to show me the musical instruments.

I was taken to another room. Enormous engines and tools stood there, each representing a musical instrument. Gigantic trumpets emitted a deafening thunder when the bellows, to which they were attached, were compressed. Triangles as large as a room were sounded by means of steam hammers. On top of an enormous kettle-drum trained elephants moved in a circle, beating the drum with their feet. There was also a prodigious organ driven by an electric machine which simultaneously operated thirty pianos and a thousand steel-whistles, ranging in size to the bulk of a factory chimney. The conductor was standing on a high bridge; as he threw out his arms, a single chord blared forth, producing such a blast of wind that I

thought I would be swept away. Before each musician there was a keyboard like that of a type-setting machine. They all were wearing spectacles and kept peering at the score.

Giddy and my ears roaring I now found myself in another room where the manager already was waiting for me. I told him I had seen the musical instruments but did not know any of them and was unable to play them. He shrugged his shoulders and said he regretted very much, but in this case I was a goner. Then we were standing before two doors covered with curtains, which led into the theatre. Through one of them the actors, wearing a thousand masks, were hurrying towards the stage. Each time the curtain flapped, the twinkling of varicoloured lights could be seen. I wanted to go in, but the manager told me that as I did not know anything, it would perhaps be better if I visited the mortuary first.

We entered the other door. A dark gangway led down to the cellar. Flickering gaslight was hissing far away, in the dense and foggy shadow, niches opened on both sides. Grimy-faced servants in white aprons were moving in and out. I was seized with fear and did not dare to look in. At the end of the gangway the manager stopped and talked to somebody. I looked around surreptitiously; all along the wall long tin tables were lurking, on which naked corpses were lying in rows: old people, children - I even caught sight of preserved parts of long-deceased bodies. A suffocating, heavy smell of formalin streamed out of the depths. I espied yet another completely dark gangway leading downwards. The manager was speaking about me; he seemed to be recommending me to the doctor with a view to my staying there. The doctor was looking in the direction of the dark gangway.

At this, I implored them not to compel me to stay there; I told them I would rather - if there were no other choice - learn something which would enable me to appear on the stage. They wagged their heads, and the doctor remarked that only acrobatics would do as the audience was already impatient.

Now they took me high up, into a kind of attic. Through little vent-holes I could see the town way below. Long, narrow ladders were leaning against the walls. Ropes, bars and nets lay strewn about, and youthful acrobats, in pink tights, were practising on the ladders. A ladder was placed before me, and I was told to climb up. As I reached the top, the ladder was swung out over the street - I held on tight and looking down could see the whole town with people running about the streets like ants. Then, screaming faintly, I lost consciousness.

But there I was again, and for many a week and month I continued to learn and practice. Up and down the ladder I climbed, and when this went fairly well and I was able to stand on the very top, they reached up a chair which I carefully balanced on the highest rung and then climbed onto myself. Later on, we did the same with two and even three chairs. What seemed like an age, went by in this manner.

And then, at long last, I stood on the stage - but my face had become thin and wrinkled and caked with rouge, like those I had seen at the beginning. It was as though I had been with the circus for many, many years, and I knew every nook and corner in it. I was wearing pink tights, and I prowled about in the semi-darkness of the side-curtains in a state of great fatigue. Perspiring servants were running about with carpets. I heard a continuous wearysome humming, but I was too tired to want to know what it was. Suddenly a sickeningly bright light broke in upon me - and before my eyes the velvet curtains parted. Beyond, a sea of hands came into view. There was a brief clapping, followed by an expectant, whispering silence.

There I stood, all alone, on the carpet in the broad, white light of the stage. I ran to the centre with noiseless steps, the cone of the searchlight following me everywhere. With snakelike movements I bowed repeatedly towards the boxes, on either side. Then I got the ladder and

quickly, without making a sound, and so easily that I did not even feel my body, I climbed to a height of four storeys. Up there I cautiously crawled still higher up a single thin pole, swaying a bit, until I got my equilibrium. Next, a table with iron feet, placed on the end of a pole, was reached up to me. I grabbed the table and supported two of its legs on the top rung of the ladder. Then climbing upon the table, I stood up straight, carefully keeping my balance. Now three chairs were set one above the other, and I could hear a contented murmur from below as I climbed up the structure. The legs of the last chair pointed upward, they quietly swayed to and fro, as with bated breath I set an enormous cube point downward on the end of one of the legs. The whole construction was lightly throbbing under me as if the beating of my pulse were running right down to the lowest rung of the ladder. Then slowly I crawled up it. I reached the pinnacle and relaxed. Hot drops of sweat slid slowly down my face. All my muscles were taut as a bowstring, and trembling. I waited till the structure stopped swaying, then, in a deadly silence, I straightened out, opened my robe, and drew out the violin... With a tremulous hand I laid the bow across the strings... now, groping with my foot, I cautiously let go of the pole... bent forward... balanced for a few moments... and, making use of the silence of terror, which tore open the mouths and gripped the hearts in the depths below me, slowly and quiveringly I began to play the melody, which long, long ago had resounded and sobbed in my heart.

1915



## SÁNDOR HUNYADY

(1892-1942)

He was born at Kolozsvár (now Cluj, in Rumania), the son of Sándor Bródy, the popular and influential author of the turn of the century, and Margit Hunyady, the beautiful and successful actress. He became a journalist at an early age and wrote brief news items, colourful reports and features for provincial and metropolitan newspapers. His interest drew him more and more towards *belles-lettres* and the stage, and he published a number of novels and volumes of short stories in quick succession. His comedies stand out from the poor theatrical crop of the era. In *Családi album* (Family Album), an autobiographical novel, he relates his childhood; the novels *Nemes fém* (Precious Metal) and *Jancsi és Juliska* (Jack and Jill) take the reader into the Budapest theatrical world; *Géza és Dusan* is a love story in a South-Hungarian setting. His greatest stage success was scored by the play *Feketeszáru cseresznye* (Black Eyes). Some of his writings have found readers outside Hungary; several of his stories have been adapted for the screen in the United States.

He died in 1942, in Budapest. Waitresses, jockeys, newsboys, poets, and servants attended his funeral.

For the most part, he turned to the life of the upper middle-class for his themes - everyday urban life interested him most of all. Over and over again he would tell his stories to his friends, at the café or in the club, watching the effect, and altering his plot, the point of the story, or the style accordingly. And when he had told for the tenth time, his friends would smile and assure him, "All right, Sándor, now you can write it down." Reading his short stories, one is struck with the effect they give of the naturalness and liveliness of the spoken language. He learned a good deal from French literature - an unwavering adherence to truth; elegance and precision of expression; his seemingly careless style is the result, in effect, of meticulous craftsmanship, just as his anecdotes, funny or tragical, hide a sardonic and trenchant view of the world. One of his critics hit the nail on the head when he said that Hunyady had been a witness who belonged to nobody in this world.

## ADVENTURE IN UNIFORM

When the war broke out, I joined up as a second-line reservist in the Fifty-first regiment with the grey insignia. True, I had received no volunteer's braid, but none the less I was well off. My unit was stationed in Kolozsvár where I had been born and I knew half the town. I was a journalist and had joined the regiment almost straight from the editorial office. My sergeant called me "Mr. Editor." My whole military service consisted of getting into my uniform twice a week, in order to present myself, for appearances' sake, at my company. Otherwise, my life went on as usual. I wore civilian clothes most of the time and through the windows of the café I watched the companies marching to the station on their way to the front.

I am not telling all this just for the sake of bragging. The older I get, the more ashamed I am of having defrauded myself of my share of suffering at a time when everybody else was suffering. But it is part of the picture that the reader should know what an irresponsible puppy and how far from being a fine soldier I was on that summer Sunday afternoon when this story began.

Yet I looked mighty soldier-like at that moment. I wore the infantryman's standard uniform, with heavy laced boots and tight-fitting blue trousers. Round my waist was the regulation belt, with the double-headed eagle on its brass buckle. I had just left the barracks, and was done with my day's service. I was hurrying home to my rooms to change back into civvies and to go to the theatre where I was courting the second *soubrette*.

As I said, it was a Sunday afternoon. The street was brimful of promenading servant-girls in holiday clothes. Kolozsvár is a veritable reservoir of various folk-currents. And the servants' parade was made as scintillating as a peacock's tail by the little bebies of Szekler, Rumanian and Hungarian girls, sauntering along arm in arm. Each village was represented by its own characteristic dress, hair colour, figure and temperament, its ribbons, skirts and kerchiefs. What gaily swarming crowds! How brightly the clean-washed, eager faces shone! Everybody was in a hurry to cram as much happiness as possible into an afternoon that was passing far too quickly.

Many of the girls gave me the glad eye, some of them smiled at me, a few even accosted me. Indeed, why shouldn't they? I was twenty-two years old, and in my standard uniform and iron heeled boots I must have looked exactly like any other peasant boy from one of the neighbouring counties. I found it all very amusing. I felt like a prince in disguise. I winked back at the girls and even pulled their pigtails. I behaved just as an infantryman should who is out for a bit of Sunday adventure. I scored victories and suffered setbacks. The girls joggled me, trod on my feet, pinched my arms. The wide-rolling river carried me gaily along amidst its little eddies.

Suddenly the tide swept me up to a tall girl from Kalotaszeg. We bumped into each other. I looked at her. She was a lovely creature. Clean as fresh linen and slender as a birch sapling.

I clutched her arm.

"Where are you off to?"

"I'm off to find a sweetheart," she answered pertly.

I drew her towards me.

"Then you can stop looking right now, for I'm in the same boat."

The girl gazed at me. It was an honest, serious, scrutinizing look, as if I were a chicken or cabbage she considered buying at the market place. Finally she nodded.

“All right. Let’s go together.”

A wave of pride rushed over me. Deep within me I felt a strange warmth spreading, the heritage of a million years. The spark in her touched off an answering glow in me. I was filled with a sense of triumph, and, at the same time, of tenderness, of yearning devotion. And I knew that she felt the same about me. We walked along silently amidst the jostling crowd. Our mood had become more serious. The palm of my hand was scorched by the touch of her strong elbow, as I held it to keep her from being whirled away from me.

She really was a lovely girl. Chestnut hair, grey eyes. Her light-brown tender skin seemed to be too tight for her full face. It stretched tautly over her nose, her lips, her chin. I was inclined to think that she could hardly shut her eyes, the little muscles round them were so elastically resistant under that clear complexion.

When I first accosted her I had perhaps been a bit familiar. But after a few minutes of silent walking, I involuntarily spoke to her more tenderly and respectfully. And I saw with surprise that this serene young peasant girl responded at once to my new way of approach. She too dropped her pert tone and asked me with simple directness where I came from. Was I from Kolozsvár?

I told her I came from Szilágy County. I even invented a name for the village: Pokozd.

“And you, I see, come from Kalotaszeg,” I said to her. “What’s your name?”

“Vilma Jakab. And yours?”

“Sándor Nagy,” I lied, for I had no doubt that this girl would leave me flat and angrily run away if I told her that I was not of her own class.

As we strolled on she told me that the place where she worked was in Bocskai Square, and that her master was some kind of civil servant. It seemed to be a decent family. Still, she didn’t know the place very well yet... She had only come up to Kolozsvár from her village two weeks ago.

“I’m free till eight,” she told me, “but then I have to go home. They will be having supper at home tonight. Not that they couldn’t manage without me. It’s just a cold supper. Sausages.”

Each Sunday this peasant promenade follows the same precise course, reminiscent of the march of ants over the ground. The colourful stream first flows through Honvéd Street, then up the right-hand side of the Main Square; from there it continues through Union and Bartha Miklós Streets towards the river Szamos and turns again along the right-hand side of the avenue. The right-hand side is crowded, thick with dust, loud with noise, and one is pushed and bumped along continuously under the ancient trees; the other side is almost completely empty. Only a very few people loiter there in the shadow of the shrubs. I thought this was just a matter of custom, so I said to the girl:

“Let’s cross over to the other side. What’s the use of getting squashed in this crowd?” The girl stared at me.

“Don’t you know, Sándor, that we are not allowed to go over there? The policeman would chase us back. That side is reserved for the gentry.”

Of course I didn’t know, how should I have known, gentleman idler that I was, the extent of the stupidity and insolence reflected in such police orders?

The blood rushed to my head. Without thinking I mumbled to myself furiously:

“What a damned shame. I’ll have to write about this.”

“What are you saying?” the girl asked in fright. I evaded a direct answer.

“The devil take them, it’s a rotten trick, not to let one walk where one feels like! Why are those people over there better than we two?”

The girl did not have the slightest notion of socialism. She simply shrugged her shoulders.

“I don’t know why you should get so angry about it. If you like, we can go down there where the geese and ducks are, we won’t find many people there.”

But I was infuriated. It suddenly occurred to me that I couldn’t take her to the Kiosk, a “first-class” restaurant, either. The waiters would promptly tell us that this was no place for infantrymen and servant-girls. The impudent swines! For the first time I was feeling on my own hide what the presumptuous measures taken for the convenience of my kind of people meant to other.

There was a little amusement park along the avenue, so we went there for want of a better place. We rode on the swings. We weighed ourselves. We looked at the Tattooed Lady. We took turns striking at the test-your-strength machine. When I paid, I changed a five forint piece.

The girl stared at me and the coin.

“Where did you get so much money from?”

“My father has quite a bit of land and we are part-owners of a threshing-machine, too,” I lied to her quite fluently by this time. “Five forints are nothing to me.”

But the girl did not let the matter rest at that: “We too have land and we have a house. But my father would strangle my brother if he threw away good money the way you do...”

By now I had completely forgotten that I was due at the theatre. I had forgotten the *soubrette* and my own status in civil life. Deep down in my heart I was wishing that my invented Szilágy County background would become a reality and myself really be a peasant boy who that Sunday afternoon had found his life’s one true love realized in this fresh, lovely, natural young girl.

It was an afternoon of perfect bliss. There was only one dangerous moment in it. A bow-legged, pockmarked old cavalry corporal tried to take the girl away from me. First he walked up and down before us like a dog in heat. Then he suddenly picked a quarrel with me, claiming that I hadn’t saluted him properly. He made me stand at attention and gave me a thorough dressing-down in front of the girl. He had the right to do it, for he was a corporal and I was a mere recruit. I tried to bear his insults patiently, but felt my face turning pale and the muscles of my right arm quivering with the desire to draw out my bayonet and plunge it into this yellow-toothed, tobacco smelling vile rat.

The tension between us was becoming more and more dangerous. By now our eyes were flashing something quite different from what we were saying. I don’t know what would have happened if the girl had not intervened, if she had not drawn her arm through mine in profound solidarity and turned humbly, yet very firmly to the corporal:

“I know why the honoured corporal is badgering this youth. Please, leave him alone, sir. You can’t separate us anyway, for, you see, we are from the same village...” And she squeezed my arm to her side.

The corporal stood quite still for a few seconds, staring at us very hard as if calculating inwardly whether it was worth his while to risk a scandal. Then, perhaps a spark of humanity being kindled within him, or seeing something hard and determined written over both our faces, he put his sword firmly under his arm, turned on his heels and went off in search of new conquests, giving vent to his anger in a single sentence:

“The devil take you both and your village!”

When the danger had blown over, we walked quietly side by side for a while. It was she who at last broke the silence. Quietly, tenderly, wisely she spoke her mind:

“You see, Sándor, this is why you ought to try and get a higher rank for yourself. For if you had had even a single star on your uniform, this corporal wouldn’t have dared to be so insolent towards you. Because it’s only with those who have nothing and nobody in the world that people dare to be so mean. One doesn’t need to have much, say just a few pitchforks of hay, and people will already overlook this and that and be nice to one, for they will think: ‘who knows when we’ll be in need of a bit of his hay...’”

Plenty of my girlfriends had tried in the past to inspire me to greater ambition. But I had always rebelled against their endeavours. Yet, there was so much of selflessness and tact in this girl’s attitude, such wisdom in what she said that I felt like kissing her hands.

Our arms round each other’s waist, we silently walked on - infantryman and servant-girl - amidst the gradually dispersing crowd, as dusk began to envelop us.

When the church clock struck half past seven, and the girl began to talk of having to go home soon, I told her with a heavy heart:

“It won’t be easy to part from you, Vilma...”

She pondered a bit, then looked up at me and said: “We don’t have to part. You can come up to my room. You will have to wait while I serve supper. Then you can stay with me. But come only if you don’t have to go back to your barracks before morning, I wouldn’t want the janitor opening the door for you at night and asking you whom you’d been visiting.”

Plain talk, indeed! A downright invitation to a night of love. But it was not said frivolously. She spoke simply and without beating about the bush. As of something natural and human, a part of life as simple as breathing.

“Thank you very much,” I answered gratefully. “Luckily, I can stay out all night, the sergeant is a pal of mine.”

We started off quietly towards Bocskai Square.

On the way the girl told me that her boss’s name was Ferenc Bodrogi, she did not know where he worked except that it was some kind of an office. He had a wife, a son and a daughter. His son was away now in the army. They lived at number four, on the third floor.

Her explanation first shocked me, then I very nearly burst out laughing. I knew this family very well. Bodrogi was an engineer at the Gas-works. I had gone to school with the son and had even courted the daughter. I had been to their home quite often. It was strange for me to have to enter the familiar gate and go up the dark and narrow backstairs, only lighted on the second floor by a very small gas-lamp.

When we reached the third floor the girl searched in her skirt for the key to the kitchen and unlocked the door. The kitchen I knew quite well too. Sometimes, when the bell was not functioning at the main entrance, I had knocked at the backdoor and come in that way. There

had been a little Rumanian servant girl in the house before. She had been rather pretty too, and I remembered pinching her cheeks.

Vilma now turned the light on and took off her shawl. I stood on the threshold of the open door and wanted to go in after her.

She turned towards me.

“Stay outside a bit in the gallery, Sándor, till the family has gone out or gone to bed. One of them might come into the kitchen. There’s no need for them to see you. They might even not like your being here.”

“They certainly would not,” I thought to myself as I stepped out into the narrow open passage. It was quite dark by now. Lamps shone brightly in the doors and windows looking out on the passages, running around the inner court of the huge tenement house at the level of each storey, and you could see shadowy figures moving about in the kitchens. Somewhere a servant-girl was singing. Another soldier, presumably on the same errand as myself, was loitering on the first floor, leaning against the iron railing.

It was a hot summer evening. “The smell from the yards of houses like these is certainly abominable at this time of year,” I thought to myself as I sat down on a dustbin, between a cold flat-iron and a paper-sack containing charcoal.

Vilma was busying herself in the kitchen. She prepared the plates, forks and knives, sliced the bread and put a clean napkin in the bread-basket. She peeled five pairs of sausages and sliced onions to go with them. From the cupboard she took out some cherry strudel - which obviously had been left over from lunch-time. She called to me through the open door of the kitchen:

“Will you have some, Sándor?”

I would have liked to, but Vilma could not bring anything to me, for in the door leading to the flat the daughter of her employers appeared. There was a time when I had found little Piri attractive. I had particularly admired her skin and her hair. Now I no longer liked her face. It was much too hard. I was annoyed, too, at her not returning Vilma’s friendly “good evening” when she came into the kitchen. From the dark passage I noted the boredom with which she went up to the table and picked a cherry out of the strudel.

My blood boiled to hear her talk to my Vilma as if to her slave.

“Bring in the supper at once, Vilma. We are going to the cinema. When we are gone, you’ll put the table in order, do the beds, and then you may go to bed yourself, we won’t need you anymore tonight. Only don’t forget to wake me tomorrow at seven and clean my tennis shoes.”

When the young lady had flitted back into the flat, Vilma came out into the passage for a moment and said:

“Isn’t she pretty? Piri is her name.”

The bell in the kitchen rang impatiently. Vilma carried the sausages and onions out and left the kitchen empty.

I could follow every step of the girl in my thoughts. I could visualize the dining-room, the dinner table, the settee, the clock, the pictures on the wall.

She kept on hurrying to and fro between kitchen and dining room. They rang for water. They rang for salt. I heard her turn on the tap, when, at long last, they were through, Vilma came out

to the railing and shook the crumbs from the tablecloth. Then Piri appeared once more. This time she had on her hat and coat. She took out of the cupboard some sugar and coffee for the next day's breakfast. Then she left without saying goodnight.

The main door was slammed and I saw the family I knew so well, go down the stairs.

Now the girl called me in.

"Go into my place while I put the kitchen in order, will you?"

What she'd called "my place" was a tiny room, or rather a cubby hole, aired through the kitchen. There was barely enough space for the iron bed and the single chair, on which stood a tin wash-basin. The girl's coloured skirts and cheap blouses hung from two nails in the wall. At the head of the bed stood a small painted wooden box, the kind peasant boys take with them when they go into military service. On that wooden box lay a Roman Catholic prayer-book, which had been stuck full of holy pictures with paper-lace edges. The Holy Virgin wore forget-me-not coloured veils, the pictures of Christ were pale and waxen, with blood dripping from under the thorny crowns.

I sat down on the bed and silently watched Vilma putting the kitchen in order. Outside the heavy summer smell from the yard had appalled me. But in that windowless little chamber I thought I was inhaling the light smell of village soil. The smell of a peasant house with earthen floor. Perhaps it was not just any fancy, perhaps she had brought that faraway fragrance with her clothes.

I began to get impatient.

"Aren't you coming yet?"

"Right away. Just let me wash my hands properly," she replied, "I have been handling onions, you know..." And she went to the tap by the wall, where she washed her hands thoroughly with a big cake of crude laundry soap.

At long last she came into her tiny cubby hole.

"Get up, so I can make the bed."

I rose, took her waist, and drew her to me... I have had plenty of adventures with women. But never before, or since, have I felt such purity, such dramatic strength in any embrace. My own strength was as nothing compared to hers as she threw her muscular arms round my neck. She took my head in her hands and looked straight into my eyes.

Softly she said:

"It's all on account of your eyes. That's why you are here. I loved your eyes the moment you first spoke to me..."

Well, this adventure turned into a genuine love affair. We met on three consecutive Sundays and there was a holiday in between when we were together, too. Four times in succession and each time I put on my infantryman's uniform and played the peasant boy. Or rather I didn't even play the role. I simply behaved naturally, in harmony with my happy mood. I only had to take care not to talk about things that might awaken the girl's suspicions. Incidentally, our conversation was much more interesting than is usual on such occasions. And that by no means on account of my wits; it was due to the wealth of her emotions, her utter sincerity, her remarkably expressive and colourful language.

On the fifth Sunday afternoon I did not go to our usual meeting-place in front of Hintz, the chemist's, on the Main Square. Why did I stay away? I can't remember. Perhaps I had

something to do, or I simply overslept. The fact remains, I didn't go, but kept on my civilian clothes all day and at about seven o'clock that evening I chanced to pass the chemist's shop.

She was still standing in the doorway of the Hintz house, motionless, a shawl round her head and shoulders, waiting. One could see, by the way she stood, that she had been there for hours. Her face was earnest and sad. There she stood, peeping out into the rain from the entrance. For it was raining and growing dark. So she did not recognize me in my suit and rubber raincoat. Indeed, she hardly looked at me. She was expecting somebody quite different - a young soldier in a blue coat with belt and boots.

As I walked past, my heart gave a big leap. But I did not want her to see me in my elegant clothes. Besides, I wasn't alone. A colleague of mine hung on to my arm, for we had only one umbrella between us. We were discussing the war, and were walking fast because of the rain.

But when we were about three blocks away, my throat suddenly grew parched. I thought of Kipling's native girl who waited for forty years at the crossroads for her unfaithful British soldier. I ran all the way back to the chemist's shop. But she was no longer standing in the doorway. Poor girl, she must have just left. It was half past seven by that time, and she had to go home to lay the table, serve the supper.

I cursed myself. My heart was aching. I loved that girl.

On the following Sunday it all came right again. We met as usual. I lied to her about having served a day's detention at my barracks. We walked together, we rowed on the tiny lake by the avenue, and fed the swans with bread-crumbs. And at night we again lay together in her little room, in the narrow iron bed, holding each other closely in the earth-scented dark. Suddenly the girl laid her head on my chest and whispered:

"How long shall we be like this? One of these days you'll be put in field-grey uniform like the others, and I'll see you marching to the station with flowers in your cap... And when that happens, I'll drown myself in the Szamos..."

I very nearly gave myself away then. I would only have had to turn on the light and show her my hands: "Look how soft my hands are. Open your eyes at last: do peasant boys have hands like mine?"

But I did not have the courage to do it. I was afraid of making her sad. I felt she would not take what had happened between us as a joke. But I also knew that the truth was bound to come out. I simply could not go on cheating this pure, kind-hearted creature who had given herself to me so completely, so unreservedly, without any thought of what people would say if they found out, without fearing shame or unhappiness. Once, she had said to me very simply: "If I have a baby I can never again go home. My mother would shut the door in my face."

I don't know exactly how I conceived the unfortunate idea that it was much better to let her find out about me by herself, without my telling her. Let her but see me in my true light and draw her own conclusions, thus avoiding a big scene. I could always add some explanation later.

It was a stupid idea. Today I can find no excuse for my having accepted old Bodrogi's invitation to supper. Why did I have to do such a thing? Perhaps it wasn't I that did it, but the devil, who sometimes gets the upper hand in us.

The old gentleman found me at the café.

"Come and dine with us tomorrow night, young man... my son is back from his unit on a three-days' leave."



I dressed with meticulous care for that supper. I had a fine beige summer suit, and that is what I put on. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw a perfect dandy.

I rang the front bell. Piri opened the door for me.

“Well, here you are at last! Nearly half an hour late.”

We had a quick nip of rose brandy. Then we sat down to table. I was placed next to Piri. I had a vague idea that they might not be disinclined to offer me her hand in marriage. Only, of course, I would have to pull myself together, take the bar exams or get a teacher’s diploma.

The hostess called through the door:

“You may serve the supper, Vilma.”

Everybody was jabbering away around me. My pal was telling me about artillery training, the hostess was complaining about market prices and the engineer was analyzing the situation at the front.

Piri put her hand on my arm.

“What’s the matter with you? Why are you so nervous?”

It was at this moment that the girl came in. She was carrying a big platter of stuffed eggs. She stood quite close to the table by the time she saw and recognized me. Her face first turned as white as a sheet, then it changed to a flaming red. She did not say a word, she even looked quite composed. But I sensed her deep pain as her arm and elbow trembled when she offered us the eggs.

I could not look at her as she carried the platter round the table. I just stared in front of me. There was complete silence. When she reached my side and offered me the food, I whispered:

“Good evening, Vilma.”

“Good evening,” she answered dully, a vacant look in her eyes. And again I sensed that she had to summon all her peasant strength to keep from fainting there beside the table, with the dish on her arm.

Miss Piri began to giggle:

“So you know each other, do you?”

And with ingenious feminine intuition she added:

“Perhaps from some soldiers’ ball?”

Everybody broke into laughter, amused at the incongruity of such a ridiculous supposition. The girl herself, her expression set and cold as stone, walked mechanically round the table offering the food. When nobody took any more, she went quietly out of the room. Her hands were full of dishes, and she pushed down the door handle with her elbow. Then she closed the door again very softly from the outside.

We ate and ate. They spoke to me, but I did not answer. I did not even understand what they were talking about. With all my heart, with all my thoughts, I was in the kitchen, seeing the insect-powder strewn in the corners, the entrance to Vilma’s tiny room with the narrow iron bed, the nails in the wall, and the gay clothes hanging from them. At the table my hosts scolded me for being so absent-minded. In my confusion I muttered something about a sudden toothache, and Mr. Bodrogi advised me to apply some rum. His wife rang the bell above the table for the next course. She rang once. She rang twice. She rang a third time. Nobody came

in. Finally, with a look of annoyance on her face, she got up from the table and went out into the kitchen herself.

There was a long, painful pause. I felt my heart throbbing in my throat, but I lacked the courage to dash out into the kitchen and find out what was happening there. What could have happened? From out there one could hear a low, subdued discussion, followed by ominous silence. Finally the door opened and the hostess reappeared, holding the second course in her own well-manicured hands. She sat down in her chair, her face red with anger.

“That girl,” she said, “has suddenly gone mad. She says she won’t stay another minute. She’s given back her pay. She put it down on the table and declared she’d rather throw herself out of the window than come back into this room. Have you done anything to this girl, Sándor?”

They all stared at me.

“Me? I didn’t do a thing,” came my cowardly denial.

Nobody was laughing now. The dining-room was charged with an air of calamity. We ate in silence. Everybody felt that something serious had happened. Suddenly Piri jumped up and, on the pretext of going for the mustard, rushed into the kitchen, as if unable to control her excitement and eager to satisfy her curiosity. But she was back again in a minute.

“The silly girl has already packed all her things. She’s given me back the key to the kitchen. Here it is.”

And she put the little key I knew so well, down on the table.

“Has she really gone?” I asked in a low voice.

“She is just leaving,” Piri answered sharply, looking straight into my face with malevolent curiosity.

Suddenly all the bonds of patience, good manners, and friendship which held me to these people, snapped. I threw my napkin on the table and jumped up. Without even asking to be excused, I ran out like a lunatic. I raced along the passage and down the stairs, taking the steps three at a time. I caught up with her just as she was stepping out into the street. She had her shawl on and was carrying her heavy wooden box in her right hand. Her shoulder sagged under its weight. I sprang in front of her, all out of breath. She stopped too. She looked at me with gentle warmth, without reproach, as though she were saying good-bye with her eyes.

“Vilma, my darling,” I stammered and tried to take her left hand in mine.

She hid her hand away.

“Let me go, sir,” she said softly but with such indescribable firmness that I had to step aside. Once more she looked at me. Then she turned her head away and stepped out into the dark street carrying her green wooden box. I never saw her again.

1930

## ANDOR ENDRE GELLÉRI

(1908-1945)

The Second World War took a heavy toll of both the great ones and the promising young talents of Hungarian letters - youthful poets, authors, critics and literary scholars died in air raids or in extermination camps. Such was the end of Andor Endre Gelléri who, on the evidence of his work - four volumes of short stories: *Szomjas inasok* (Thirsty Apprentices), *Hold utca* (Moon Street), *Kikötő* (Port of Call), and *Villám és esti tűz* (Lightning and Evening Fire); and one novel: *A nagymosoda* (The Laundry-works) - might have significantly contributed to the corpus of Hungarian letters, had he survived the war.

Gelléri's lifework is a dialogue between Play and Reality, between an exuberant, soaring imagination, and crude facts. He is a modern artist who has had to break through conventional styles to find his own voice, his own message. Although born into a middle-class family, he was a 'minstrel' of the underdog, who preferred to mix with the proletariat of his district of Óbuda, Budapest - young people out of work, artisans who have gone broke, hard-drinking workers, furniture removers. Amidst poverty and terror, he would spot and describe charity and beauty and, above all, the fun of life. He raised reality into a vision, lifting his characters and readers into a magic fairy-world of his creation. Unexpected beauty shines up from the dreary world of "the humiliated and the distressed," poor people on the periphery of life. That is why, reading his short stories, we feel what his master, Milán Füst, has expressed so beautifully about them. "A Gelléri short story leaves you full of tears and yet so full of happiness!"

Gelléri's destiny was a tragic one - his career came to an abrupt end just when it was on the point of reaching fulfilment. Who knows in what direction his meandering literary course would have taken him if he had come out of the war alive? His entire collected work fills no more than one bulky volume. These are consummate short stories, perfect according to the laws he laid down himself. They breathe poetry, true and pure.

## WITH THE MOVERS

I was out of work. I had flung myself down in a park, and was drowsily watching the play of green colours on the lawn and in the treetops. As the clock struck eleven, a pretty young miss came walking down the lane, her breasts gently dancing. My intoxicated gaze followed her to the far edge of the park, where she disappeared like the sun dipping below the horizon. And darkness took possession of me again.

I was startled out of my brooding by the rumbling of a dray cart. It was drawn by a lustrous gold-brown horse which beat the asphalt with heavy hooves. The shirt-sleeved driver kept swishing the whip, as if whistling a merry tune with it. Clustering behind him and clinging to his seat, were a noisy bantering gang of drink-loving removers.

They were headed for the trees where they snuggled their cart up to the kerb. One of them climbed on a pile of tools and held a spy-glass to his eyes, as if scanning the ocean. "Anyone want to earn a couple of pengoes?" he shouted, and out I jumped from the park as from a green prison, and leaped on the cart. No sooner had I drawn myself up than the man who had shouted came over to me and laughed gaily into my face. "Here, Jack," he said, handing me some bread. "Have some grub first, so you don't topple over... You'll get your two pengoes afterwards... It'll take us a couple of hours... and a gallon of sweat."

"Been out o' work for long, chum?" asked another fellow. The words he spoke were almost drowned by the jolting of the cart as his mate's had been. And I, forgetting the weeks of bitterness behind me, mumbled through my stuffed mouth: "Six... weeks..."

Our job was to lug a safe up to the first floor of a mansion with a marble staircase. I had been trying to act the man of experience, but was genuinely amazed to see how smoothly the massive thing slid off its base and was trundled along on two iron bars up to the stairs as if it weighed no more than a stone. It barely took five minutes. All my strength seemed to have flown back into me when, harnessed to the sturdy wooden trundle like human horses, we started to pull-and-push the safe up the dazzling white stairs to the accompaniment of lusty "heave-ho's." The iron rings along the sides of the trundle creaked plaintively from the pull of the rope passed through them. A cheerful lot but a moment ago, the men like myself were now breathing hard and their ruddy faces began to perspire. But when we were received on the first floor by the chatter of an appetizing chamber-maid while a bewhiskered private secretary with a Frenchman's air about him showed us the way; and when, as we jauntily moved the safe through the rooms, we were welcomed by a sparkingly elegant lady amidst tapestries and cut mirrors which reflected our cocky gait and the safe as it rolled on in its leisurely way - well, then and there I suddenly took such a strong fancy to this trade that, on the way back to the pub where the gang had set up their headquarters, I caught the hand of big-mustachioed Old Joey, and, looking him square in the eyes, said, "Couldn't you take me on as a regular?"

The other fellows heard my words too, and peered into the air as if the answer were written there, and pursing their lips, shrugged their beefy shoulders and complained that business was slack, that they could hardly earn enough to buy their food... But then, with a sudden change of mind, they shook hands with me on it.

I've been one of them ever since. I sit, when we're idle, behind the fleecy foam of my pint of ale; or I watch the trunkless heads bobbing up and down in lively conversation behind the high-set windows. When a job comes our way, I stretch my limbs, yawn, and then clamber onto the cart. I have by now acquired that cock-sure air with which my mates whistle their

way through the streets, and let my well-fed frame be jolted about just as unconcernedly as they. We fling obscenities at the girls we pass, and rumble on. Szepi is the strongest member of the gang: he lifts weights every morning; and the six of us wouldn't think twice before tackling thirty-odd students.

When we pass along a park, it's my duty to climb on the heap of tools and shout at the jobless men lingering there, "Hey you chaps, come along and help!" And if one of them looks too skinny or sickly, I wave him back. "We don't want skeletons, my boy," I tell him, and as we giddy-up our fat brown horse, Sári, I can see the one who's been rejected hang his head and walk away with heavy feet, perhaps even weeping.

They make *me* do this on purpose to remind me of bad times past.

Many's the time we go in for a drinking-bout. Last night, too, we had a splurge in the company of two tarts, blonde Tess and ginger Gisella. We made a hot evening of it, alright! We had plenty of beer and peppered wine. Old Joey grabbed the pot-bellied accordion player, shoved him under the table and told him to make music there; then, taking the red-haired hussy by the waist, he danced with her on the table, as brisk and lively as if he had never seen fifty.

The two wenches took it out of us pretty badly at the hotel, so this morning we sit around our pub, with leaden faces, swallowing large quantities of sodium bicarbonate and sharp paprika. Only Old Joey shoots proud glances at the table, even stroking the spot where he footed it with the redhead last night.

It is high summer, and the place is swarming with big bluebottles. The coolness of the sprinkled floor feels good under our feet; and we hardly mind the pub-keeper's dog Bodri licking the tips of our idle fingers.

Szepi has dozed off on his chair and is snoring away in the sun; and we, too, merely raise our heavy eyelids from time to time only to shut them again tighter than before.

The languid quiet is shattered by the buzz of the phone. The pub-keeper motions me towards it with his long-stemmed pipe. (He always calls for *me*, as I'm more intelligent-looking and a smarter talker than the rest of the gang.) Reluctantly I walk up and, puffing and sighing, put the receiver to my ear.

"Hullo," I mumble. "Yes, ma'am, at your service... What number did you say?... Number seven, Trefort Street, second floor... A safe... I've made a note of it, ma'am... We'll be there in an hour, and be done in another... Well, fifty pengoes, if you please, ma'am. Rock bottom and no haggling... It's very hard work, you see... With full responsibility, of course. Thank you, ma'am, we'll be there... Good-bye."

Back in the room, I clap my hands and shout: "C'me on, Franci! Bring up the old cart." The fellows stretch themselves; and then jolting along on the cart, they deliberate how many extra hands we should pick up at the park.

"Two will do, in the rear."

We pass through the streets, yawning all the while. Our limbs are heavy, our waists as stiff as stone. We have to unbutton our shirts, the day is so hot. It would be pleasanter to take a nap, instead of having to work. But then, if we give four pengoes to the extra hands, we shall still have enough left to keep the six of us going for two or three days.

"Any concrete in that safe?" Old Joey turns on me suddenly. I scratch my head: "I clean forgot to ask about *that*."

“If there’s concrete in it, you’ll have to take on six extras, not two. And then good-bye to our money!”

Well, we shall see. I wave my hand like they did to me before, and five blokes run up, out of breath. They are mighty anxious to get the job. Now which of them shall I take? That little stocky fellow with the big, strong hands will do. Who else? The lanky one there must be a better sort, judging from his looks - but he’s too thin for the job... Aw, let him come along.

The little stocky fellow is called Paul; he asks for a fag in advance, and instantly starts swearing and talking smut. He goes over big with everyone. But the lanky one is a silent bird, with that thin neck of his; he stares straight ahead, blinking, his hair tousled by the wind. He looks like someone riding in a car and enjoying the caress of the breeze. He’s a good sort, so why not give him a chance to make some dough? But as we get off in Trefort Street and I see him produce a pair of nickel-rimmed specs and put them on, I cannot help thinking the gang will send him packing because he looks just a bit too toffish. But without waiting to be told anything, he picks up the heavy casters, goes to the trundle and does everything without so much as a word - quite unlike the little stocky chap. I begin to be glad that I picked him.

“You fellows will stay in the rear,” says Old Joey, and he gives a rap on the metal wall of the safe. “You hear that? It’s got concrete in it... Now you, Isaac, or whatever your name is,” he goes on, turning to the greenhorns again, “you get the crowbar and don’t let the safe slide back, not even half an inch, though it breaks your back. And you, Paul, you push it on the side and keep on pushing like hell.”

The safe is mighty heavy. And the staircase is narrow, with the wrought-iron work of the handrail sticking out in places. What is more, the stairs curve sharply at each landing.

We take up our stations at the end of the rope. “Heave-ho!”

The blasted thing won’t budge. We exchange significant glances: we still are feeling pretty lazy, and our muscles are awfully stiff.

“Blast you! - Heave! Up!” It moves upwards two steps and encouraging each other with our shouts, we clutch the rope with our cramped hands and pull till our veins bulge fit to burst.

Glancing back through the blood-red haze before my eyes, I cannot see the little stocky fellow; he must be taking it easy somewhere below. The lanky one, however, his spectacles running with perspiration, his panting mouth as wide as a gate, is almost collapsing under the strain of raising the huge weight with an iron bar.

“The devil take it,” Old Joey pants and shakes his grey head, causing the sweat pouring down his face to spray in all directions like a spring shower. My shirt-tails have slipped out of my pants, and the draught from above feels cool upon my flesh. Franci, his belly protruding, sticks out his two bad upper teeth almost down to his chin, while his nostrils quiver from the exertion. Usually I can tote ten times as much, but that crazy binge last night and that hateful blonde Jane have used up my strength, and my companions are in no better shape. It seems as if only my bare bones were heaving and the muscles were hanging from them flabbily.

Luckily, we at last reach the landing on the first floor. The air resounds with our cursing and swearing. We spit and wipe our faces, red as horse-meat, on our shirt-sleeves. Szepi, well-nigh choking with a cough that never leaves him, is about to light a fag when Old Joey strikes the whole packet from his hand and sends it flying down to the ground floor. “Wait till we’re done,” he grunts. “Have you got so much wind to spare?”

Little stocky Paul is leaning against the banister and spitting across the safe at the wall, he accompanies this action with a violent curse.

Lanky keeps on wiping his glasses, holding them against the sun and breathing on them. He does not say a word till I ask him: "Some weight, eh?" Then he nods: "Sure is..."

Soon we are at it again. It is bad enough that the landing is covered with linoleum, so that our heels slither about as if we were sliding on ice. After an agonizing struggle we reach the first stair leading up to the second floor. Fifty pengoes are a mere song for a chore like this one. It would be best to take a good rest or send for more hands. One floor - that's a child's play; but when you tackle the second, everything seems twice as heavy. Yet it would be a shame to give up now we've begun the job, a team of eight men! None of us so much as opens his mouth... To be a man is to keep on pulling and heaving even if you feel you can't any more!

I am one with my mates, heart and soul, I know that what is too heavy for me is too heavy for each of the others. So I get pretty scared at the curve in the second flight. I keep on pulling, I can hardly stop myself from yelling, my feet slip again and again on the edges of the stairs, and I am hardly able to get a foothold.

The safe refuses to budge and even slides back one stair.

"Hang on, Joey, for Christ's sake," I groan.

"I'm hanging on," says he, getting more purple in the face than ever before.

Oh, those wicked females and that booze last night! Now there's hell to pay, all right.

"Give it a pull, boys!" Franci bellows.

"Heave-ho!" thunders Szepi's rich bass. The big hulking fellow is standing on tiptoe, as if wanting to break loose from the earth... But he sinks back, his limbs shaking, without the safe having budged half an inch. Yet here we are, rounding the semicircle of the curve with the back of the safe swinging out in mid-air, ready to tip over any instant. And even if the fellows at the back manage to jump aside, it will surely crash through the staircase as it swings back. We stand there flushed and breathing heavily. Slowly but surely the safe seems to be wrenching our waists and arms out of their sockets. The rope is already slipping a little through my hand, and the trundle is wobbling threateningly.

We look back. We can't hold out much longer. Lanky is struggling with all his strength, gasping for breath; the iron bar is lying across his shoulder, his mouth is awry, his knees buckle under him but again he rises and heaves away.

"What will come of this?" I ask myself and close my eyes. "Up!" I shout. "Heave!... Up!"

Suddenly I am petrified at the sight of stocky Paul popping up from behind the safe, bending over the smooth banisters and gliding down them like a little boy.

"I've no mind to croak for your two pengoes," he shouts up at us, as he disappears.

I haven't the strength to shout after him: "You dirty skunk!"

But the fair-haired lad, completely absorbed by the struggle, continues to hold his ground. Now the safe is about to crush him together with his bar, but he draws himself up again, peering at us, goggle-eyed. "I say..." he groans huskily, "I say..."

We can't give up, even if it kills us. I'd better shout for help. Let all the tenants turn out and turn out quick. But my cry for help is no more than a half-choked whimpering, like that of a

little boy. That fellow at the back is done for! And this two-ton monster is going to crash through the staircase, and we shall come tumbling after.

At this moment, what at first seems to be a blown-up white shirt comes sailing up the stairs. The white shirt reveals the rotund outlines of a fat belly. And now, I catch sight of a pair of short legs being lifted by their puffing owner from stair to stair; and beside him the blonde mop of hair belonging to a skinny little servant-girl, carrying a shopping-bag full of vegetables. The fat bastard blinks at us, and stops dead, instead of rushing to our assistance! I yell at him as if I had paid him a hundred pengoes, "Quick, give us a hand, or it's going to fall on you." At this, still unruffled and with slow, deliberate movements, he peels off his lustre jacket, gives his moustache a twirl and rolls to the side of our bespectacled lad like a meatball. Now Lanky, shifting his iron bar on to the fat shoulder of the newcomer, applies his arms and body to the safe. The meatball turns red in the face and begins to pant; he too is alarmed by the swaying of the safe. Almost touching the stairs with out foreheads, we give the trundle a pull in a last, desperate effort.

With much creaking and grating it shifts at last and follows us obediently from stair to stair, as if its great weight has melted away. On reaching the second floor, we sit down on the edge of the safe, every one of us. Sweat is streaming down our cheeks and from time to time we inspect our bleeding palms. There we sit, and we would like to go on sitting there until nightfall. Meantime that silly chatterbox of a maid gives free rein to her tongue. "I dunno what you'd have done," says she, "if Mr. Frey hadn't lent you a hand!"

"Ahem," says Mr. Frey, puffing and blowing, and putting on his lustre jacket, from which he produces a long cigar. "You should have brought along a few more hands."

And off he goes proud and priggish, with the skinny little maid. I hear him speak disparagingly of us, while the girl fawningly echoes his opinions.

Now the safe rolls on through a set of luxurious rooms. We shove it along, as if in a dream, still afraid that the floor may give way under our feet any minute.

At last we get our fifty pengoes. The lady of the house tries to beat down the price.

Clutching the money in one hand, I hold the iron ring of the trundle inertly in the other: we carry it downstairs like a big beetle. Lanky has shouldered the iron rollers and carries them like a pair of rifles.

We step out into an empty street: it is lunch-time. The sun is undisputed sovereign. He is baking the houses as if intending to dine on them in the evening. At the wagon-pole, Sári welcomes us with her neighing and kicks at the air.

"Whoa!" I shout weakly. "Whoa!"

Lanky silently mounts the cart and lets his feet dangle from the side. His shoulder is marked with black-and-blue weals, imprinted by the iron bar. Sári trots along gaily. Franci almost drops the reins. He never once swishes his whip as he's so fond of doing, but huddles up in as little space as possible, so as to prop up his tired limbs. My shirt and pants are drenched with sweat, and whole puddles seem to fill my boots. This damn cart will jolt the life out of us by the time we get to the pub.

We stop at the park. I produce a five-pengoes piece and my companions nod their assent: he has earned it. But Lanky does not stir, he just sits there with his feet dangling and his eyes closed. Looks like he has dozed off.



“Shall we take him as far as the pub?” I ask. “And besides... You see, Old Joey, he’s a decent chap, Lanky is. S’pose we feed him up a bit, and...”

But now he gives a start and, seeing the park, jumps down instantly. He looks up at us in embarrassment.

With a sudden gesture I hand him the money and hear his murmured “Thank you... Thank you.” Franci cracks his whip at Sári, and we rumble off.

And now we’re back again at the pub sitting at the green covered tables and groaning from exhaustion.

Without waiting for orders, Gus, the waiter, brings us the usual froth-glasses of ale. Old Joey orders a goulash.

“You got to get some grub,” he says bitterly, “you just got to.”

Sipping my ale, I stare drowsily into the sunlit liquid.

Little by little the heads around me sink onto the table: the boys fall asleep in broad daylight. Empty and forsaken the very beer-glasses are napping around them.

The mirror on the wall reflects the images of the dozing men; I draw myself up a little and cast a tired glance into it.

Suddenly I hear Sári whinnying in the street: someone will have to go and get water for her. I borrow a pail in the kitchen, and presently, leaning against the pole, I find myself watching her open mouth, her yellow teeth, her greedy tongue. Amazing how much she can drink.

“Hey, Gus,” I shout in through the window. “Bring me another pint.”

And together we drink, the horse and I.

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